

Drowning in Demons (And Learning to Breathe)

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Drowning in Demons (And Learning to Breathe)

by [ariverofthings](#), [PS_NoThanks](#)

Summary

NOTE: This work was previously titled Itsy Bitsy Spider.

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If he was being honest with himself, he was slightly terrified of the skinny boy standing in front of him, who looked as relaxed as he could possibly be, so naturally, Tony stuck out his hand for the boy to shake, ignoring the slight twitch from him at the sudden movement. “Tony Stark.”

“I know,” the boy said. His voice was quiet, calm, but he sounded like he’d seen a lot more than someone of his age ever should, and his eyes, brown and soulful, carried the same message.

“This is usually when you tell me your name, kid,” Tony prompted.

“Oh, right,” the boy said hurriedly. “It’s Peter. I’m Peter.”

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OR

The oh-so-overdone HYDRA Peter trope that literally no one asked for, but we delivered anyway. Featuring shameless Peter whump, way too much angst to be healthy, and a bucketload of Irondad and Spiderson fluff.

Notes

SO, this is the first chapter of our collab, we're really excited, and we hope you guys like it as much as we do.

There will be many more chapters to come and we have the basic plot outline so there's that.

Disclaimer: we (sadly) don't own any of these characters or like, organisations, just the plot.

Twinkle Twinkle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They wiped him before the mission. They always did. “We have to keep you safe,” they said. “We know what's best for you,” they said. It didn't feel safe when there were hundreds of volts of electricity coursing through his veins. It didn't feel safe when every memory he'd ever had slipped out of his mind like sand out of a sieve, leaving only their shadows in the chaotic whirlwind that was his brain.

Of course, safe was a relative term. He'd never felt truly safe, but he felt even less so when he was in the grips of that machine, with metal bands around his limbs and head and torso. Who was he? Well, he didn't really know. His handlers called him Asset, or Spider, when he was on missions. He knew that some people had names; he'd heard them coming from his handlers' mouths when they spoke to each other, he'd heard civilians say them. Names were a word that belonged to a person, and that one person alone. Asset didn't have anything to call his own, not even the clothes on his malnourished back or the bed with the lumpy mattress in his cell.

He supposed that he could call HYDRA his own. He'd been raised there, trained there, taught there, tortured there. Maybe he'd had a life before, a name, someone who loved him and held him when he was hurt. Was there even a before? If there was, Asset didn't remember it. His past was blurry, but he saw flashes of it every now and again. A woman with brown hair and green eyes leaning over him. A man with cold eyes and an even colder heart teaching him how to read, write, shoot a gun, hide a body - that man had taught him the essentials, and even gave him a few books on science, which Asset had shown a particular aptitude for, when he did well in his lessons. His first kill. His first gunshot wound. The first time his powers had made an appearance - strength, senses, healing, agility, metabolism, stickiness (that one had been a surprise) and a sixth sense. The experimentation, days and days of needles, of cutting him open and sewing him back together, of testing his limits to see just how far he could go. The delighted grins of his handlers when they'd gotten the results back. Maybe he could call HYDRA his own, but he didn't want to.

The men came for him while he was in his cell, recovering from the wipe (they'd refined it since the days of the Winter Soldier, that traitorous bastard they called Mr Barnes - Asset could retain his ability to think for himself and make the best decisions for the mission, unlike Barnes, who was just a command-following husk of a man. All the wipe did was clear his head and get rid of 'distractions', whatever that meant). They still needed the words, though, the words that lurked in the back of Asset's mind, a constant source of worry. They were only nine words, but they sparked raw, visceral terror in his heart every time they were uttered.

Звезда

Красный

Синий

Надежда

Восход

Три

Одинокий

Соблюдать

Шестнадцать

Just nine words to wipe away everything that made Asset... Asset. Although admittedly, there wasn't much there to begin with.

The men's bulky black uniforms stashed with weapons meant there was a mission, a mission that his particular set of skills was needed for. His suit was thrown at him and he caught it easily, pulling both it and the mask on without hesitation. It fit him like a second skin, and he didn't need a mirror to know what he looked like. The material was thin, completely black, and fit his lithe form tightly, allowing him to be stealthy and agile. It wasn't very protective, but given that he was trained to take some hits and dodge bullets, protection wasn't necessary.

The men escorted him out of his cell, four of them surrounding him like a prisoner. That's what he was, really. *Wait, what? No!* Where did that thought even come from? That... that was treason, and he wasn't a traitor, he was loyal to HYDRA. Right? *Yes*. He wasn't a prisoner, he was a trained assassin, and he did whatever HYDRA told him.

He continued marching down the hall, slightly perturbed by the nature of his thoughts. He *was* loyal to HYDRA. They did good work, ridding the world of bad influences with the help of people like Asset. Asset was doing good work. So why did he feel so *guilty*? Why did he feel so *alone*? Why did he feel so *trapped*? No! Why was this happening? Where were these thoughts coming from? They were treasonous, and Asset may have been called a lot of things, but a traitor like the Winter Soldier was not one of them. He was loyal. HYDRA, and their mission to better the world for the greater good, was the only thing that mattered.

They arrived at Lab Seven, which was specifically built for enhanced beings like himself. Without needing to be told, he stuck out his right arm, waiting for the sharp prick of a needle in the crook of his elbow. He'd done enough missions (forty-six, soon to be forty-seven, and he hadn't failed a single one) to know the drill. They'd drug him to make the trip easier, and when he awoke he would be where he needed to be, with all the equipment he needed. All he had to do was wait for the right time and pull the trigger, or start the timer, or obtain the target. His missions were simple, and each one made his handlers prouder and prouder. Asset was the most trustworthy agent they had, with a 100% success rate, and he'd been told that he had already surpassed Barnes in every way. It was the only piece of praise he had ever received, and he clung to it like a lifeline.

The drugs were in his system, making his brain feel fuzzy and his body heavy. The concoction they pumped into him was strong enough to knock out an elephant - it had to be, with his metabolism - and it worked fast. He passed in and out of awareness while he was shoved in a van and driven along bumpy road after bumpy road.

They reached their destination and he was injected with a needle again, this time with the drugs that cleared his system - he didn't know the name. His head was clear within a minute, and his limbs lightened not a few seconds after. HYDRA gave him a gun, just a regular old pistol, which meant it would be a close-range hit. He didn't like those ones, didn't like seeing the life leave his target's eyes, didn't like watching their skull implode with the force of his bullet, didn't like knowing they probably had a person waiting for them at home. But he'd do whatever HYDRA

asked, because he wasn't a traitor. *He was loyal.*

They showed him an image of his target, a man with blonde hair combed back off his face and kind brown eyes, framed by prominent laugh lines. He wasn't given a name - he never was - and he didn't know the face either, which meant he wasn't well-known. HYDRA kept him up to date on all the current affairs so he wouldn't be distracted or make a fatal mistake when he went on a mission. He'd been told about the whole fiasco with the Avengers, and how one of their leaders, Iron Man, had managed to create an evil robot called Ultron, with the intent of destroying the world. Asset didn't know many things for sure, but he did know that the Avengers were bad, *bad* people.

Apparently, the man showed up at exactly 1:00 pm every day to eat his lunch in the park. They opened the doors of the van, and Asset was pushed out into bright sunlight. He immediately scaled a tree, his trainer's words ringing in his ears: "Always find cover, stay hidden, never be seen."

The scene was idyllic; green trees, pink flowers and a bubbling stream overtook Asset's senses, before he blocked it out and focused on his task. He scanned the park, looking for his target when he caught sight of a man - not his target, but another man - and his child.

Instantly, Asset's senses went off as the father and child approached. The pair wasn't dangerous, but he couldn't afford to let these civilians stand in the way of his goal. Moving quickly and quietly, he hefted himself further up the tree, concealing himself in its leafy branches.

Rule number one - never be seen .

But of course, it was just his luck that the man and boy kept coming.

"Daddy, can we climb the tree?" he heard the boy ask. Asset closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, praying that the father would have enough sense to say no. He didn't fancy killing two more targets than he had to, but if these civilians decided to get in his way, he would be left with no choice.

"Sure, Tommy," the man replied, an easy grin forming on his face as he picked the child up and plopped him clumsily on his shoulders.

Asset readjusted his position, hunkering down low so that he was completely shrouded by the leafy branches of the tree. Up here, in his all-black, skintight outfit, he was perfectly poised to strike. His senses heightened even further as the father came to a stop at the foot of the tree, the child still balanced precariously on his shoulders. Slowly, carefully, Asset withdrew his right hand from the tree branch and tightened his fingers over the gun secured in his holster.

Rule number two - leave no witnesses.

"I can do it, Daddy, let me do it!" the boy cried excitedly. Clambering off his father's shoulders, the small child grasped the trunk of the tree and hoisted himself into its boughs.

"Whoa, steady there, Tom," the father cautioned, his hands positioned to catch his son if necessary, but the little boy was determined.

"Let me do it, Daddy," he repeated breathlessly. "I'm gonna climb all the way to the top and be king of the jungle!"

Asset slunk further back into the dappled shadows cast by the leaves, his heartbeat quickening ever so slightly. It seemed as though he would be forced to kill them after all. His stomach churned uncomfortably at the thought, but he quickly pushed all emotions aside, desensitising himself

completely to the task that lay ahead. He'd learned from an early age that there was no such thing as *feelings* and *kindness* and *mercy*. Such novelties were for the weak, serving as nothing more than a distraction, a barrier between him and completing another mission. Asset had never yet failed HYDRA, and he didn't intend to break his success streak now. *He was loyal.*

The boy was still climbing, his navy-blue bucket hat falling off in his attempt to race to the top. His shining blue eyes were alight with excitement, his jaw set in comical determination. As Asset stared down at him, still concealed in the leaves several metres above, he faltered ever so slightly. The boy was so... *innocent*. So young. Just a kid, really-

No! Once again, Asset was temporarily confronted by the disturbingly *humane* nature of his thoughts. He couldn't afford to be thinking like this. He'd kill the boy, and then he'd kill the boy's father, and then he'd kill the target. 46 successful missions would become 47, and Asset would return to HYDRA with another achievement under his belt.

"Ahhhhh!" The boy's cry jerked Asset back to life. Evidently, he'd lost his footing, for he was now sliding ungracefully down the tree, toppling towards the ground. *Perfect*. Asset would wait for the child to fall, and with any luck he'd sustain some injuries. It would provide the perfect distraction for the father...and the perfect opportunity to strike.

"OUCH! I got you, kiddo!"

Once again, the father had disrupted his plans. Annoyingly, the man had managed to catch the boy before he could fall. It was nothing more than a mere hindrance, though. Peter could easily take them both out right now.

His hand tightened around the gun as he slowly drew it out of its holster.

Rule number three - do whatever it takes to finish the mission.

"Whew, that was a close call!" the father exclaimed, holding the boy in his arms. "You alright, Tommy?"

Asset slowly exhaled, his fingers fitting easily into the metallic indents of the gun, just as they had done on so many occasions before this. He raised the gun and pointed it directly at the father - better to kill the larger threat first.

"No, it hurts," the boy whined, tears streaming down his face. "My foot got stuck. It really hurts."

Do it. Pull the trigger. Kill them.

"Whoa, sshh, it's okay," the father said, his tone gentle and comforting. The sound was completely alien to Asset's ears, yet as soon as he heard it, he felt a sudden, instant, inexplicable *longing*. For something he'd once had, maybe in a time before HYDRA...

No, stop. Don't think about it. Trigger. Pull. Kill.

There was no time before HYDRA. There was only the next mission. Curling his finger around the trigger, he allowed himself only a moment's hesitation, a brief flicker of a second.

It was the second that would come to change his life.

A sound suddenly reached Asset's ears, a sound like nothing he'd heard before. At first, it was only confusion that kept him from pulling the trigger, as he struggled to identify what he was hearing. Was it really... no. Surely not.

Was the man... *singing?*

Asset's grip on his gun loosened as the soft hum of the man's voice drifted towards his ears. Once again, he was struck by the alien nature of the sound; he'd only ever heard people singing in the outside world, during his missions, and only on two rare occasions. Yet despite the foreignity of the man's humming, he was again hit with a sudden, overwhelming surge of certainty: *he had heard this song before.*

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star

How I wonder what you are..."

And suddenly the man was gone, and the crying boy in his arms was gone, and even the tree bearing his own weight was gone. He was in a completely different world, being held in a woman's arms, cradled against her chest, as the lyrics of the song floated above him, running like a beautiful river...

"Up above the world so high

Like a diamond in the sky..."

The warm woman's voice continued to run over him, completely encapsulating him in her depths, and he felt warm and cosy and completely, utterly carefree. Nothing could worry him, not in her arms, not with this song...for the first time in his entire life, he felt honestly, truly happy....he felt *safe...*

"Twinkle twinkle little star

How I wonder what you are."

"Hey, are you alright?"

Asset jolted upwards, his heart pounding furiously against his chest as he struggled to remember how to breathe. His mind racing, he blinked as the world slowly came into focus. He was no longer perched precariously in the branches of the tree, but lying flat on his back on the grass. Groaning against the pain in his torso, he took a few steadying breaths, attempting to slow his heartbeat down to a healthy rate.

"Hey, can you hear me? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

The voice startled him out of his pain-riddled haze, panic settling into the space it had left. Scrambling to his feet, Asset quickly assessed the situation. The man was crouched in front of him, the same man that he'd been planning to kill only moments earlier. His expression was one of utmost concern, his eyebrows furrowed and his laugh lines crinkled in worry. Behind him, the boy stood shyly, hidden by his father's form.

It hit him, then. He'd fallen out of the tree. He'd been *seen*. *He'd failed HYDRA.*

"Hey...is this yours?" the man asked, more hesitantly this time. Asset refocused his attention and saw that the man was, rather tentatively, handling the gun that he'd withdrawn from his holster only moments earlier.

"I - I don't think you should have weapons like these," the man continued, now watching him with a guarded expression. "Where did you get it, kid? Where are your parents?"

Asset couldn't speak. His throat was scratchy and dry like sandpaper, his heart still hammering wildly against his chest, struggling to break free of its bonds. The woman's voice echoed hauntingly in his ears.

Rule number four - always return to HYDRA.

"Are you lost?" the man pressed, rising to stand over Asset. "Do you need help? Who can I call?"

Later, Asset would wonder why he had done it. He would ask himself, in the late nights he spent unable to fall asleep, why he hadn't just grabbed the gun off the man, led him on a chase to somewhere more secluded, and shot both him and the boy? Why hadn't he murdered the witnesses, like he was supposed to, and then finished off the target? Why hadn't he remained loyal to HYDRA?

Four rules. They had governed and dictated his life for as long as he could remember. Just follow the four rules, and nothing bad would happen to him. Follow the four rules, and he was safe.

But Asset had never felt safe. Not really. Not until a few precious moments ago, with the song washing over him like a beautiful stream and the woman's arms around him like a safeguard...

The man was still talking to him, asking him more questions, his voice rising in pitch as he evidently became more disturbed. Asset didn't hear him. He could hear nothing but the faint echo of the song in his ears, a dull reminder that he had indeed felt safe once. In another lifetime, maybe, or a different world. Either way, it didn't matter.

Asset wanted to feel like that again.

And so he ran.

Chapter End Notes

Right, that's the first chapter and we really hope you guys liked it, feel free to comment or leave kudos.

For the record, Asset's (or Peter's) words were

Star

Red

Blue

Hope

Sunrise

Three

Lonely

Comply

Sixteen

What a Small World It Is

Chapter Summary

Peter's new life, which he has only just grown accustomed to is about to change once again.

Also Tony shows up, and he, being the person he is, is the reason for that change.

Chapter Notes

Annnddd we're back with our second chapter! Featuring Peter being introduced to all the wonderful things about pop culture, lots of Avengers fluff (with lots more to come), Tony Stark being Tony Stark, and HYDRA doing what they do best. Enjoy! Disclaimer: again, we don't own this wonderful universe with all these wonderful characters, only the plot.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The streets of New York that he roamed were tough, but when compared to HYDRA, his days on the cracked pavement were breezy.

He struggled to find enough food to satisfy his metabolism, but he wasn't forced to starve for days on end, just to see how long he'd last.

If he wanted to stay alive, he had to sleep with one eye open, but no one other than the occasional asshole who was clearly inebriated beyond belief actually came at him with the primary intent to hurt him.

He slept on freezing street corners and filthy alleyways, but he wasn't imprisoned behind a locked door for seemingly endless amounts of time while every aspect of his life was held out of his reach and beyond his control.

He was given the occasional curious, concerned or even disgusted glance, but they were nothing when compared to the dark glares of HYDRA agents, or the analysing eyes of their scientists as they poked and prodded at him like he was a piece of meat.

So yes, he wasn't really living his best life, but cold street corners were so much better than being nothing more than a murderous slave.

At least this way, he could have a say in what happened to him. At least this way, he was *free* .

It had been six months since the boy - Tommy - and his dad, had made an unexpected appearance and disrupted his entire life.

Six months since a few bars of song had ruined his perfect streak of completed missions.

Six months since he'd gone against everything he'd ever learnt, and done the one thing he'd sworn

to never do. He'd betrayed HYDRA.

He'd hesitated for just one second, and the result had been a head full of memories of unknown origin and a glowing target on his back, because HYDRA was looking for him. He was an asset - *their* asset - and they wanted him back. Desperately.

He'd seen at least twenty different undercover HYDRA operatives skulking around New York in the last six months, but there was a reason he'd been the best agent in the organisation. He'd spotted them instantly and managed to make a swift getaway without any problems. Really, the whole thing had been nothing but a minor hindrance for him.

A lifetime of training to be the perfect soldier and assassin meant that he was perfectly equipped to be aware of his surroundings at all times, subconsciously or not, and that aided him when it became apparent that HYDRA was not only aware of his disloyalty, but informed of his vague location.

But being hunted by the evil organisation that had raised him was nothing compared to facing the bustling streets of New York with decidedly less than adequate social skills. The aforementioned evil organisation hadn't been very focused on teaching him social niceties and etiquette when they were molding him into their perfect child soldier.

He considered himself of above average intelligence, and so was able to figure out some of the basic stuff right off the bat. Climbing on walls was a no, as was showcasing his superhuman strength. Basically, alluding to the fact that he was anything other than human was off the table.

But other things had taken him a little longer to pick up on. Like why, exactly the people of New York were so proud of their hot dogs - the things were greasy atrocities, and he'd vomited it all up into a rubbish bin as soon as he swallowed the last bite (sidenote: both vomiting into a bin and stealing hot dogs were frowned upon by the general public).

He'd also been intrigued to find out that his skin-tight, black suit wasn't what one would consider 'normal clothing' (if you asked him, even having something like 'normal clothing' was weird, but who was he to question the ever-fluctuating fashion trends?). Ditching the clothing item was oddly cathartic, and he decided that he wasn't all that sad to see it go. Call him crazy, but that might have something to do with all of the negative connotations attached to the stupid thing.

The one thing he did keep from his HYDRA uniform was his web shooters. They were small, metal bracelets that he'd created out of scraps on a mission when all of his other weapons had been put out of commission (which was a feat in and of itself - he had *a lot* of weapons). They'd started off as a contingency plan, something for him to use if all else failed, but he found himself using them more and more as the mission progressed, and by the end he was almost completely reliant on them, despite the fact that he'd managed to obtain several more knives in the time it took for him to reach his end goal. By some miracle, HYDRA had been impressed with his work, and had let him keep them.

The shooters projected a white, sticky substance that almost resembled webs (hence the name, web shooters), at whatever he aimed them at. He didn't know if they could be considered weapons, more like professional hindrance-makers, or a form of travel (he had a tendency to swing around on the webs they created. Yes, it was weird, but it was also very effective) but they'd saved his life multiple times, during both missions and on the streets.

The thing that he loved the most about freedom that he found came with roaming the streets was that he'd been able to choose a name for himself. An honest to goodness *name*. A word to call his own - it was all his. He owned it.

Peter. He was *Peter* .

He'd found the name itself in a novel entitled 'Peter Pan'. The book had been fished out of a donation bin at one of the homeless shelters he frequented, having discovered they didn't care all that much about his age and wouldn't dob him into the police, or Child Protective Services, or whoever else was on the hunt for underaged children on the streets.

After blitzing through it, and falling in love with the characters, he'd named himself after the main protagonist. It had been a casual decision, but one that he was sure about. The name just felt right on his tongue, and as he twisted it around in his mind over and over again that night, he couldn't help the satisfaction that rose up inside him.

He had discovered two things, though, and they'd been utterly world-shaking. One, was the realisation that HYDRA, an organisation he had almost *willingly* worked for his entire life, was considered the lowest of the low and hated by literally everyone. The guilt that had been manifesting in his chest ever since he regained his memory was almost crushing, but it seemed to get just a little bit worse each time he discovered something else on the horrifyingly long list of 'Terrible Things HYDRA has Done'.

The second thing was finding out that the Avengers - a group that he had been taught was the epitome of evil - were actually *not* terrible people. In fact, many of the civilians he saw worshipped the ground they walked on. He heard their names whispered through the streets in reverent tones, side by side with words like 'heroes' and 'saviours'. What he was most surprised to discover, however, was that there were real people under the famed superhero personas.

Iron Man was really Tony Stark: a genius-billionaire dude who had gone through his fair share of trauma, both before and after he'd adopted his suit of armour. Peter hadn't been able to stomach reading much of the (probably, definitely, private) information that he'd dug up on the Afghanistan incident, but what he did see was too much, even for him.

Captain America was also Steve Rogers, a super-soldier-on-steroids from WWII who'd woken up after being literally frozen in time for almost seventy years (Peter couldn't get over how *cool* that was. He was burning to find out just how the man had survived), in a new age, and had to adjust to all of it.

The Hulk's alter-ego was an esteemed scientist named Bruce Banner. Ironically, the man was very intelligent and soft-spoken, which completely juxtaposed his angry, but not very bright, other half. Peter didn't even have time to notice the irony in the man's situation until later though, because he was too busy obsessing over Dr Banner's research. It was incredible, and the dude had *seven PhD's!*

There was also Thor, a literal God of Thunder, who was ensuring the wellbeing of two worlds, and had to carry that burden on his broad shoulders, virtually alone.

The Black Widow was really Natasha Romanov, a woman in a man's world with no family to support her, and a past that could possibly rival his own in the trauma and tragicness department. However, he didn't for a moment let that fool him, because he'd heard she had an arsenal of kickass moves and wasn't afraid to use them.

Hawkeye, AKA Clint Barton, was a regular man in a team of elite superheroes. Despite the fact that he was hiding his very own secret family, the man still dedicated a large portion of time to defending millions of others across the country, and occasionally the world.

Peter had had a very intensive research session at a library computer in order to gather all of that

information, and it may or may not have required some illegal hacking of SHIELD databases.

He'd heard of the organisation before, but all he knew about them was that HYDRA had several agents nestled within their ranks. Peter figured they must have been relatively important, though, because it took him three hours to break through their firewall, even with the extensive hacking lessons that HYDRA had put him through. Doing it on the ancient machines that the New York Public Library had the audacity to call computers was almost enough to drive him insane, but it had been worth it in the end, because the information he'd gathered was enough to catch him up on recent events.

The knowledge that he gained during the day was not enough to distract him from the terrors of his past that haunted him at night. While he was asleep, his mind often tugged him back to his time at the organisation, and he was forced to relive his worst moments there, again, and again, and again.

Blood and bombs, bullets flying through the air, the screams of a child in pain. Pain. So much pain.

But when the sun shone across the tops of the buildings each morning, Peter rose from his bed of old newspaper and a singular, scraggly blanket, and pushed the horrors of the night out of his mind, because he had a job to do.

And that job was finding food. The commodity was hard to find in excess on the grey pavement of New York, and it was even more difficult to get something that was actually *edible*, so Peter had been forced to obtain it using morally questionable (read: illegal) methods. He didn't steal food every day, because he knew it was wrong and he honestly didn't think he could deal with any more guilt on his shoulders. But sometimes the gnawing pit in his stomach was just too much to bear, and he *had* to fill it.

He'd never been caught - his sticky fingers (literally), and sixth sense, made sure of that - but he did feel bad. To negate the ever-growing guilt within him, he never took more than he needed to, and he made sure to find some other half-starved kid that looked like they could use a decent meal and then 'accidentally' drop the leftovers of his partially-eaten meal in front of them.

Peter probably wasn't as subtle about it as he thought he was - he could sneak in and out of a top-security prison with no problem, but performing random acts of kindness weren't his forte.

But in between his adventures in looking for food (which took up a large amount of his day) Peter had learnt a bit about something the general public called 'pop culture'.

His education on that topic may have involved sneaking into several movie theatres, and boy, hadn't *that been* An Experience the first time he went. As someone who'd never watched a movie before, staring at a blank screen only to have it burst into life in front of him, the flashy images complete with dialogue, music, and sound effects, had been more than a shock, to say the least.

But once he'd gotten over himself, he'd come to enjoy, and then love, the movie-watching experience. Peter now considered himself a verified classics expert, because he'd seen *all of them* : Shrek, Finding Nemo, Alien, Monsters Inc., The Little Mermaid, The Lion King... you name it, he'd seen it.

But his heart only belonged to the one, true God of movies; Star Wars. Everything in it was just so... *cool* ! His love for the saga could not be expressed with words, but he'd already contributed to several fan theories online.

Now though, instead of watching old movies in a virtually abandoned cinema, he was wandering

the streets of Queens, searching for food... *again* . Having a super-metabolism that needed to be fed like, every two hours, was not ideal for a homeless person.

He was expertly dodging through the bustling crowd and just generally staying out of the way of various irate New Yorkers, when he passed an alley.

While that was usually nothing to worry about, the grunts and thumps emanating from it's depths were a cause for concern. Without hesitation - because he had so much less self-preservation than the average human being - Peter entered the shadows, planning on figuring out what was happening and intervening if necessary. It was something he'd taken to doing when he stumbled across drunken fights or whatever else the irresponsible nightlife of New York did these days.

After all the bad he'd put into the world, it was time he started taking some back out again, and if stopping two testosterone-fueled, egotistical men from beating each other up while they were so drunk they could barely string two words together was the way to do it, then he would take that task happily.

So, with that thought in mind, Peter walked straight into a very odd, and slightly alarming scene: about ten HYDRA agents (signified by their bulky black uniforms and the insignia over their hearts) were surrounding one poor guy, their guns raised threateningly.

Wait, not one poor guy - it was Tony Stark, a very, *very* rich guy. What was Tony Stark doing in Queens? And the bad part of Queens, at that.

But Peter could puzzle over that later, because he needed to focus at the moment. Tony Stark may be Iron Man, but by the looks of it, he didn't have his armour, and while he probably had a relatively sound understanding of self-defense, there was no way he was as good as Peter.

Peter had been trained in combat for his entire life, in hundreds of different styles. His technique was never the same twice, *and* he was enhanced. These guys? The low-level HYDRA operatives surrounding Tony Stark? They didn't stand a chance against him. They'd all been trained in the exact same way, and Peter knew their moves like the back of his hand, so he didn't hesitate before taking a running leap and wrapping his legs around the closest guy's neck.

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"Tony? Ton-yyy? Tony! Come on man, wake up, Sam's making breakfast and I can guarantee you, you don't wanna miss this one."

Tony Stark groaned, the sound of Clint's irritating voice cutting through the deep waters of his subconsciousness. Ignoring the man's persistent babbling, Tony rolled over and buried himself deep under the covers, trying in vain to retain his state of blissful unawareness.

Unfortunately for him and his tired brain, his bothersome friend had other plans.

"Tony, I swear to God, if you don't open this door right now, I'm gonna chuck away that massive stuffed elephant you got me. Actually, scratch that, I'm gonna burn it. Smoke it to smithereens, is that what you want, Stark? Your godforsaken gift reduced to a little pile of ash?"

Well, shit. He had to hand it to the guy. Clint Barton knew how to work people.

“Alright, screw you, I’m up,” Tony groaned, his speech thick and slurred, courtesy of the night’s slumber. Cursing Clint’s name under his breath, Tony sat up in his ridiculously large king-sized bed and rubbed his bleary eyes.

He’d been dreaming about something again. Not unusual, but the key difference was that this dream hadn’t been filled with visions of aliens spilling out of wormholes, or large chunks of cities plummeting towards the ground, or any sort of mass destruction at all, really. No, this dream had been oddly...mundane. Something nice had happened, Tony was sure of it, only he couldn’t remember what.

It was a shame. Nice dreams were a rare luxury for him these days, and as such they deserved to be properly appreciated when he experienced them. Too bad Clint had to ruin his golden moment.

“Give us some light in here, would you FRIDAY?” Tony mumbled incoherently, but apparently his AI was used to his half-asleep ramblings.

“Of course, sir,” she replied, and a moment later his private quarters were illuminated with a soft, warm glow.

Still struggling to recall the dream, Tony stumbled out of bed and clumsily changed into the nicest-smelling clothes he could salvage from the jumbled pile of pants and shirts that had been steadily manifesting in the corner of his room. Staggering into the bathroom, he grabbed the nearest bottle of cologne and all but bathed in it in his attempt to freshen up. He took a quick look at his hair in the mirror, before deciding he’d deal with it later. As loath as he was to admit it, Clint was right: Sam’s breakfasts were usually pretty fantastic, and Tony did not want to miss out on it.

Hurriedly, he exited the room and rushed downstairs into the Tower’s communal area. The mouth-watering scent of sizzling bacon and freshly cracked eggs greeted him as he entered the lounge room, where Steve, Natasha, Bruce and Clint were all gathered.

“Look at that,” Clint grinned from his position on the couch. “Told you he’d be up.”

“Congratulations Barton, it only took the threat of murder most foul for you to get me out of bed,” Tony scowled, yawning as he swaggered over to a free spot on one of the sofas. “Morning, Steve,” he added, ruffling the man’s hair as he passed - an action that he knew would irk the super soldier to no end.

Steve rolled his eyes and sighed begrudgingly at Tony’s gesture, but responded nonetheless. “Morning, Tony.”

“Wait, what? Who murdered who?” Bruce asked in alarm, looking up from his careful reading of the morning newspaper.

“Clint here was gonna murder Barnaby,” Tony announced, collapsing unceremoniously onto the sofa as he did so.

“Barnaby? Who the hell is Barnaby?” Bruce frowned.

Tony gasped theatrically. “Did you just forget about Barnaby?”

“What? No - well, I mean, yeah, but - but who is he?”

“I cannot believe you right now,” Tony continued, ignoring Bruce’s confused questioning. “I’m not speaking to you anymore, Banner. You hear that? The Science Bros have officially broken up.”

“Hang on, does this mean you two were a thing to begin with?” Clint spoke up casually. “Is there something I should tell Pepper, Tony?”

“Only to bring me another one of those mud cakes, actually, they were really good-”

“Okay, will someone please explain who Barnaby is,” Bruce interrupted exasperatedly.

“That pathetic giant stuffed elephant Tony got Clint for his birthday,” Natasha responded dryly, not looking up from where she was perched on a stool at the counter, scrolling through her phone.

“Which he was threatening to murder,” Tony added darkly.

Bruce blinked for a moment, processing Natasha’s words. Then, his expression morphed into disgust. “Oh, that feral thing?” he recalled, wrinkling his nose. “Honestly, it would’ve been a blessing if he had.”

“I agree,” Steve said, shooting Tony a sideways glance. “It looked like it had rabies.”

“Rogers, elephants can’t have rabies,” Tony argued impatiently. “Or is that another thing they forgot to tell you when they carved your would-be wrinkled body out of the ice?”

“Actually, elephants can have rabies,” Bruce cut in. “Most animals can.”

Dammit. Cursing Bruce’s many PhDs into oblivion, Tony kicked his feet up casually on the armrest and yawned extravagantly. “Did somebody say something? I feel like somebody said something. Or maybe it was just a fly.”

Bruce rolled his eyes, returning to his newspaper. “Very mature, Tony.”

“Guys!” came Sam’s call from the kitchen. “Come and get your breakfast before I eat it all myself!”

His stomach rumbling in anticipation at the thought, Tony jumped up from the couch and hurried into the kitchen with the rest of the Avengers trailing after him. Sam had laid out plates of delicious-looking food on the countertop; piles of crispy bacon, mountains of fluffy eggs, stacks of buttered toast, heaps of beef sausages. Tony was left salivating at the mere sight of it all, but there was one thing missing.

“Where’s the Nutrigrain?” he complained to Sam. Really, the man should’ve known better than this - Tony needed his morning bowl of Nutrigrain almost as much as he needed his daily coffee. He’d found the cereal about three years ago, during a conference in Australia, and had been a loyal consumer ever since. He’d even had a hand in choosing their slogan, ‘Iron Man Food’, and had featured in a few of their advertisements.

Sam sighed, rolling his eyes at Tony’s words. “Oh, how could I forget,” he returned sarcastically, before pulling out a crushed box of Nutrigrain and pouring some into a bowl. Dousing the cereal with milk, he slid the bowl begrudgingly over to Tony. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks, Mother Wilson,” Tony grinned.

Sam whacked him across the head with a pair of tongs contemptuously.

Despite the sheer size of the meal, which looked voluminous enough to feed several small towns, by the time the six of them had claimed their share, the piles were diminished to mere leftovers. It never failed to astound Tony how quickly the Avengers, himself included, could work their way

through royalty-worthy feasts on a daily basis. Apparently, to be known as one of the world's mightiest heroes, you were required to develop a superhuman appetite.

Then again, nobody was worse than the demigod. Speaking of-

"Where's Thor?" Tony asked, as they all returned to the lounge room to enjoy their feasts.

"With Jane again," Sam replied easily. "They're off doing Lord-knows-what."

"But I've got a few good guesses," Clint added, smirking as he stabbed into one of Sam's perfectly-seared sausages.

"Alright, let's keep it PG in here," Steve complained. "While we're eating, at least."

"Sure thing, Cap," Clint agreed, taking a smug bite of sausage.

Tony busied himself with his own meal, happily wolfing down his Nutrigrain before focusing his attention on the bacon and eggs. He was craving a strong dose of caffeine to wash down the meal, and resolved to have Rhodey bring him coffee from the really good diner a few blocks away when he came over later.

"Sam, promise me you're never going to stop cooking," Bruce commented, his mouth full of eggs. "Even when we're all old and wrinkly."

"Technically, some of us already are," Steve joined in. The man never could resist making age-related jokes about himself, weak as they were. In response to a particularly painful one-liner, Tony had once thrown a saucepan at Steve's head. That hadn't gone over well.

"I dunno if you guys are gonna live that long," Sam pointed out jokingly. "You should be nothing more than obese lumps with clogged arteries at this point."

"I'm pretty sure I'm the only civilised one here," Natasha murmured in agreement. "The rest of you eat like pigs."

"That's it!" Tony cried suddenly, jumping to his feet as the exciting revelation hit him.

The team all turned to look at him, their expressions ranging from knowingly weary to downright terrified.

"What, is someone dying?" Bruce asked numbly.

"God, what's with all the dying stuff today?" Steve sighed.

Tony raised an impatient hand to shut him up, his mind preoccupied with more important matters than trivial things such as death. "Shut up, all of you," he whispered, closing his eyes as he concentrated. "I'm having an epiphany."

"Uh-oh," came Sam's voice. "Should I call an ambulance?"

"Get one ready," Clint agreed.

Tony ignored them all, his expression one of utmost concentration. It had been something about Natasha's words - something she'd said - but he couldn't quite grasp the connection-

*Ah-HA! Stark, you're a genius* . Satisfied with himself, Tony collapsed back onto the couch. "I've got it," he announced proudly.



“Got what?” Natasha asked coolly, eyebrow raised.

“I remembered what I was dreaming about last night,” Tony declared, the words filling him with a sense of great achievement. “We were on a farm, all of us. Then Bruce, like the bastard he is, let the pigs escape.”

“The pigs?” Bruce repeated, nonplussed.

“Yes, Banner, the pigs, keep up,” Tony repeated dismissively. “Anyway, all these poor little piglets were running free, and it was kind of bad because they were our pigs, you know, we were meant to be taking care of them. But then all of us were too lazy to go after them, so we forced Steve to do it.”

“Of course you did,” Steve muttered darkly.

“But then-” Tony grinned as he recalled the entertaining climax of the dream- “but then, Cap spent so long chasing after those pigs, he ended up turning into one.”

There was a beat. The team stared at Tony, their stares judgmental.

“Remind me how this guy became a billionaire?” Clint asked eventually, looking at Tony with concern.

“Beats me,” Sam agreed. “You sure you’re okay, Tony? You don’t need, I don’t know, a therapist or something?”

Tony scowled at their obvious bemusement. He’d expected Steve to react like this, but not all of them.

“You guys are really boring, you know that?” he muttered eventually, getting to his feet. “I’m off.”

“Where, exactly?” Natasha asked him.

Tony shrugged. “Nowhere. Somewhere. Anywhere. Who knows?”

Then, before any of the team could object, he sauntered out of the communal area and took the nearest elevator into the lobby.

“Morning, Kate,” he said, casually greeting the receptionist manning the front desk of the Tower as he passed.

Kate looked slightly taken aback at his presence - usually Tony wasn’t seen out and about before midday - but she smiled nonetheless. “Good morning, Mr Stark.”

Whistling absent-mindedly to himself, Tony exited the lobby and emerged onto the busy, commuter-filled streets of Manhattan. Now that the initial amusement of his dream was wearing off, he was left with nothing but self-directed irritation. He’d walked out of the Tower more for theatrics than anything else; the issue was, he was now too stubborn to return to the Tower. There was no way Tony was giving the team the satisfaction of seeing his begrudging face as he re-emerged from the elevator that he’d so dramatically exited into only seconds ago. It was petty, he knew, but what could he say? Tony Stark was a petty man.

*Ah, well, may as well grab that coffee while I’m out*, he thought.

Manhattan was host to plenty of local coffee joints, but Tony chose the long route, venturing much

further into the city to kill some time. He was well aware that he still looked half-asleep, with his dishevelled hair, unshaven face and rumpled, dirty clothing, but hopefully a few shots of caffeine would improve his overall appearance. The Tower had long-since blurred into the long line of skyscrapers that clouded the horizon when Tony finally decided that he'd wasted enough time to prove a point. He ducked into the nearest coffee shop and quickly ordered a large cappuccino, thinking that he'd quickly drink the coffee and then catch the subway home. He didn't think he'd participated in such a civilian activity for years, but he supposed that was what you got when you decided to make a spontaneous dramatic exit from the Avengers Tower whilst conveniently forgetting to bring your Iron Man suit with you. And FRIDAY, for that matter.

*Congratulations, Stark. Didn't feel like being a genius today, did you?*

"Cappuccino for Barnaby?" a flustered-looking waitress called. Tony stood up from his chair and strode over to the woman, accepting his coffee with a small smile.

Yes, Tony Stark was a very petty man, he thought as he took a sip of the hot drink with a smug grin on his face.

It was at that moment that the bullets started flying.

Tony whipped around so fast that he was sure his neck was going to snap. His eyes widened in horror as he saw the owner, or rather owners, of the bullets - four men, dressed head to toe in black, assault rifles in their hands. The red symbols stitched across their chests was all the identification he needed.

He'd just been ambushed by HYDRA agents.

The customers around him erupted into a panic as the bullets continued to fly. Throwing himself to the ground, Tony commando-crawled across the glass-strewn floor towards the street outside, mentally kicking himself. He couldn't possibly have chosen a worse time to indulge his tendency for melodramatics.

As soon as he was free of the coffee shop, Tony jumped to his feet and sprinted, his shoes pounding against the concrete as he pushed his way through the flurry of morning commuters, ignoring the burning pain in his knees and elbows where bits of glass were no-doubt buried. Behind him, he could hear the HYDRA agents barrelling out onto the street in pursuit, yelling commands. More shots went off. More civilians screamed.

Tony ran even faster, urging his legs forwards as he sprinted down the street. Up ahead, he could see the turn off that would lead him back to the Tower, and he gritted his teeth, planning to make a run for it back home and grab his armour and the team-

Oh, shit.

It turned out HYDRA was smarter than he'd given them credit for. The turn-off was blocked by three more agents, a wall of identical black. They were cutting him off.

Wildly, Tony looked around for an exit, an escape, anything. Through the adrenaline, he saw an entrance to the subway, a handful of feet away. With the agents closing in on either side, he had no choice.

He threw himself down the steps, hurriedly sprinting through the underground entrance as the HYDRA agents gave pursuit. He didn't stop to think as he leaped over the turnstiles - immediately, security guards shouted at him, telling him to stop, but their angered cries were soon drowned out

by the sounds of gunfire. Tony risked a glance behind him and saw all seven of them vaulting the turnstiles after him, and he quickly threw himself into the throng of people moving towards the nearest train, hoping to lose them in the crowd. More shots rang out, causing a ripple of panic to erupt through the civilians, and the crowd dispersed in terror.

Well, there goes that idea.

He had only one option left - board the train. With every last ounce of his energy, Tony sprinted for the train and practically threw himself onboard just before the train's doors began to close.

For a long moment, he stayed sprawled out on the floor of the carriage, his face pressed crudely onto the floor as he struggled to get his breath back. He could hear people whispering in concern, could feel dozens of gazes on his back. Someone crouched beside him, a middle-aged woman.

"Excuse me, sir," she said kindly. "Are you alright?"

Tony looked up at her, wheezing.

"Where's this train gonna end up?" he groaned.

"Queens," she told him, her face a mixture of confusion and concern.

"Fantastic," Tony managed, dragging himself to his feet. The carriage was completely silent now, its passengers thoroughly taken aback by his manic behaviour, and maybe his identity too. Tony ignored them all, instead focusing on controlling his breathing.

How had they found him? They must have been waiting for someone to leave the Tower - must have had agents positioned at every exit, perfectly placed to strike. What a stroke of luck it must have been for them when Tony Stark had emerged onto the street, armourless and alone.

Tony shook his head, once again cursing his own damned stubbornness.

He'd been so preoccupied with maintaining his dignity, he hadn't even noticed them following him. He'd been so busy indulging in his own pride that, like an idiot, he'd gotten himself surrounded by HYDRA. If Nat heard about this, she'd be tempted to finish HYDRA's job for them.

Which led him to the question - what, exactly, did they want? The motive for murder had been obvious; those guns weren't just for decoration, after all. But why the sudden inclination to kill Tony Stark? Was that even their goal, anyway? If Bruce Banner had exited the Tower, would they have gone after him instead? Did the target matter to them, or merely the achievement of taking out one of the Avengers?

These thoughts occupied Tony's mind all the way to the train's final stop in Queens. Exiting the train, he staggered over to the nearest timetable and surveyed its contents, looking for a train that would take him back to midtown Manhattan. He needed to get to the Tower, and fast.

But, for the second time that day, Tony had grossly underestimated HYDRA.

He should have known they'd be waiting for him.

Tony broke into a sprint once again as the HYDRA agents bolted after him, their guns firing in pursuit. There were no trains to save him this time as he fought his way through the crowd of people, many of them crying out in panic as they caught sight of what, exactly, he was running from. Vaulting over the turnstiles yet again (he'd have to write a formal letter of apology to the

train guards later, but he probably shouldn't be focusing on that right now), Tony dashed out of the subway and onto the streets of Queens, taking a left and sprinting for all he was worth. Bullets landed around his feet as he ran, smashing the glass windows of nearby stores as the agents tore after him. Tony ducked low, trying to avoid the gunfire, and took a right at the nearest intersection, only to find that the street he'd run onto was much less crowded and much more open. Two very, very bad things when being chased by men with guns.

Unfortunately for Tony, the situation only got worse from there.

The HYDRA agents were still chasing after him when Tony soon realised that he'd been led into a trap. Five more agents were sprinting towards him from the opposite direction, dressed in black and armed with guns. Tony quickly dodged to the left, trying to lose both parties, but two of the HYDRA agents quickly circled around and blocked off his exit.

He was surrounded. Completely and utterly surrounded by ten HYDRA agents, trained extensively in combat, all armed with rifles. It was laughable, really, how helpless he was.

That was, until the kid came in.

The agents never saw him coming, and the first one was down in three seconds flat. The guy next to him barely had time to react before he was dropped like a stone too.

Fifty seconds and ten disabled HYDRA agents later, Tony Stark stared in shock at the unhealthily skinny teenager beside him, who'd just taken down ten fully armed HYDRA agents in under a minute, with no weapons of his own, and he hadn't even broken a sweat. The genius doubted that even Natasha would be able to do that.

If he was being honest with himself, he was slightly terrified of the skinny boy standing in front of him, who looked as relaxed as he could possibly be, so naturally, Tony stuck out his hand for the boy to shake, ignoring the slight twitch from him at the sudden movement. "Tony Stark."

"I know," the boy said. His voice was quiet, calm, but he sounded like he'd seen a lot more than someone of his age ever should, and his eyes, brown and soulful, carried the same message.

"This is usually when you tell me your name, kid," Tony prompted.

"Oh, right," the boy said hurriedly. "It's Peter. I'm Peter."

"Nice to meet ya, Peter, but I have a few questions," Tony muttered, more to himself than the kid. Namely, how had this boy taken out ten HYDRA agents like it was nothing more than a quick game of Kick the Dummy?

The boy sighed, looking uncomfortable at this prospect. "I expect you would."

"How about you come back to my place," Tony suggested, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could give them a second thought. "Avengers Tower, you've probably heard of it? You can tell me everything. Do we need to make a pit stop anywhere to explain your absence to some worried guardian?"

"Nah, no one will miss me," the kid said matter-of-factly.

Something dark formed in Tony's chest at these words, an inkling of disturbance, but he pushed the kid's apathy towards his apparent lack of family aside for later contemplation. "Well come on then, we can have lunch at the tower too, I expect you'll be hungry - I mean, you're practically a stick - of course you're hungry!" he said, pausing briefly in his ramblings to make sure the kid was

following him. He smiled to himself when he heard light footsteps behind him.

He didn't know what was going on with this kid - who was so skinny a light breeze could knock him over, yet still seemed to possess lean muscle, and could take out ten armed HYDRA agents like it was nothing - but he was determined to find out. Besides, this Peter character looked like he could use a bit of TLC, and Tony had both the means and the will to do so.

The kid had saved his ass, after all.

## Chapter End Notes

So that marks the end of our second chapter. Hope you guys enjoyed reading, feel free to leave a comment or kudos. We'll be back for some quality Peter-meets-the-Avengers fluff soon!

# Cheeseburgers And Caffeine

## Chapter Notes

Sup my dudes

Here we have another chapter, it's nice and long so that's pretty good :)

Just a little warning, we're both going on holidays soon which means no updates for a little while. Really sorry about that :(

Anyway, we hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took about three seconds for Peter to deduce that Tony Stark (“Call me Tony, kid”) was a very strange man.

The whole time they spent travelling to the Tower (walking, Subway, more walking, another Subway, and even more walking), the billionaire never stopped talking. He didn’t talk *about* anything; Peter wasn’t able to discern what his true intentions were (because no one would just randomly invite a teenager they found on the streets to their house) but the man still managed to fill the awkward silence with endless chatter. It was a very good skill to have, because a person who was less experienced than Peter would have assumed Mr Stark was a friendly guy, and opened right up. Peter guessed he got the tactic from a lifetime of being in the spotlight.

So, while Mr Stark *sounded* friendly, Peter kept his responses monosyllabic. There was no way he was spilling any details about himself to this literal stranger, no matter what kind of ‘you can trust me’ vibe he gave off. It was probably bullshit.

About halfway through their trip, Mr Stark switched his tactic from subtly trying to dig under his defences to shooting blatant cannon balls at them.

“So, what’s your deal, kid?”

Peter merely shrugged. This weirdo was not getting anything out of him.

“I mean, you show up, in all your underfed gloriousness, and my first thought is: Oh great, now I have to save myself *and* the stick. But then, you completely wiped the floor with those agents. All ten of them. In under a minute. And they were armed.”

Another shrug from Peter.

“I mean, that’s pretty incredible. One might even stretch as far as to say an impossible feat, and keep in mind I train with the superspy extraordinaire duo.”

“Just lucky I guess, and they didn’t see me coming,” Peter mumbled, accompanied by another shrug. “I’ve lived my entire life on the streets. Picked up a few things here and there.” Okay, so maybe he’d satisfy Mr Stark with a few tidbits of information, but they didn’t have to be *true* .

“Oh, please. Kid, what you did was amazing. I mean, if you were a little older I’d probably offer you a spot on the Avengers. If you’re gonna lie - which is totally fine, by the way, I can’t say I haven’t participated in my fair share of deception - at least make it *believable* . Pro tip, trust me.

Anyway, I'm going to look you up later with my super-secret, probably-illegal methods and find out what's really going on, which means you can totally choose to work on your fibbing skills instead of telling me what's happening."

Peter merely shrugged again. Lying was yet another one of the things HYDRA had taught him with their cruel lessons. He could lie his way out of any situation. "Like I said, Mr Stark, I've been living on the streets my entire life. There aren't any records of me."

Mr Stark said nothing to this, but his expression remained disbelieving.

They finished the last leg of the journey in silence, Mr Stark striding through the streets like he owned them, clearing a path as he went, and Peter following behind him with his shoulders hunched, doing his best to dodge out of everyone's way. The crowd just got thicker and thicker, and while Mr Stark had no problem clearing a path for himself, Peter was trained to blend in, so it wasn't really a surprise when somebody knocked into him.

"Watch it, freak," a bulky man spat at him. He towered over Peter, who had been thrown to the ground in the collision. His face was ruddy and twisted into an ugly snarl, his hands reaching out to do... something, and suddenly the bustling sounds of the city faded into nothing around him.

His heart was pounding and his breath tore in and out of his lungs in sharp pants, but he didn't notice it, because all he could see was a different face, twisted into the same expression. Different hands, grabbing his shirt in a different place at a different time. He knew it wasn't real. *How could it be real?* But at the same time...

No! The handler that he saw in front of him now, dressed in the typical white lab coat and staring him down with those cold, hard eyes *was not real*. He wasn't surrounded by medical equipment and wiping technology. He wasn't strapped down to a freezing metal table. That wasn't electricity coursing through his veins. *It couldn't be*. He wasn't at HYDRA. He was... he was... where was he?

Just as his breath stopped coming all together, and his heart felt like it might explode inside his chest, he heard a very faint "Hey! Get away from him!". Or maybe his hearing was just dodgy. Had HYDRA done that to him?

"Kid? Kid! Peter. Talk to me buddy, what's wrong? Come on, people are staring."

And all of a sudden Peter was back. He wasn't in HYDRA, he was in New York, in the middle of a bustling street filled with people, and Tony Stark was crouched in front of him, one hand on his shoulder and the other on his cheek.

For a second, just one second, he leaned into the touch, and the tenseness melted from his body. But then his muscles were coiling like a spring, forcing him up and away, far away from Mr Stark because he was an *unknown*. He was a *stranger*. Peter didn't know his threat level yet, or his true intentions. *But he'd seemed so concerned*. NO. He was a stranger and Peter was an ex-HYDRA operative on the run from the organisation that had raised him. He couldn't afford to make friends. People couldn't afford to be friends with him.

He'd backed himself up against a rough brick wall, and everyone was looking at him, their judgemental eyes burning holes into his body. His heart was racing a mile a minute and his breathing just *would not get under control* and he was *panicking*.

That was until a face filled his vision again. A concerned, familiar, yet strange face, but there was no judgement, no hidden agendas, and suddenly Peter felt just a little less scared. A little less

overwhelmed.

“Hey, hey, Pete. It’s me. It’s Tony, alright? I won’t hurt you, but I *need* you to breathe buddy, can you do that for me?” Mr Stark asked gently, exaggerating his own breathing in an attempt to get Peter to copy him. And Peter tried, he really did, but he was still *so scared* .

“Okay, okay, you need to calm down, bud. Can I touch you? Is that alright?”

Peter barely managed a shaky nod before Mr Stark was placing a warm, calloused hand over his heart, and another on the nape of his neck. He didn’t have time to reject the gentle, foreign touch before he was pulled in for a hug, and it was honestly the best thing he’d felt in a long, *long* time.

He felt safe, he felt warm, he felt like someone might just give a damn about *him* , Peter, as a person, and not just about his abilities, and he knew it was wrong. Knew it was dumb - risky - to involve someone else in the terrible mess that was his life. They’d have to deal with him and all his issues, they could get hurt... or worse, but at that moment, surrounded by Mr Stark’s strong arms, he felt somehow...safe. It was something he hadn’t felt in such a long time, and so he let himself relax, just a bit. Let himself take a deep breath, and then another. Let his heart slow down and his limbs stop shaking. It was hard to ignore the alarm bells going off in his brain - he’d learned not to trust anyone from an early age. But HYDRA was his past. He couldn’t let what he’d learnt there dictate the rest of his life. And so Peter let himself relax, and hoped that maybe he’d found that person that he could trust. Maybe. Possibly. *Hopefully* .

Mr Stark didn’t push him away, didn’t ask if he was done, didn’t rush him in any way. He just stood there for the solid five minutes that it took for Peter to collect himself, and then he let Peter pull away.

Peter stared down at his hands before whispering “I’m - I’m sorry about that - whatever that was.”

“It’s fine kiddo. That was a panic attack, and lucky for you, I am an expert in both having them, and getting someone else through them. Living with a team of superheroes that have all sorts of tragic backstories and triggers can do that for you,” Mr Stark said, genuine understanding coating every word. “I also know that panic attacks can take a lot out of you, so how about we get that lunch I talked about, hm? My treat, and then you can stay at the Tower for a while. You look like you could use a good night’s sleep.”

Peter squinted at the older man, trying to discern his emotions, but he didn’t have to look very hard. For the first time, Mr Stark had a completely open expression, and Peter could see the curiosity, but more importantly, the overwhelming concern, understanding, and trust. So he nodded, allowing Mr Stark to sling an arm around his shoulders - though he couldn’t stop his muscles from tensing or his instinct from telling him to *run, flee, go, get out of there* - and lead him down the street, babbling about “this diner I found a couple of weeks ago. I’m telling ya Pete, It’s absolutely glorious, like God himself came down and blessed it. Don’t even get me *started* on their cheeseburgers.”

The diner *was* pretty cool, Peter had to admit, though he didn’t really have a lot of experience with any sort of restaurant. During his time at HYDRA, he ate what he was given when he was given it, and on the streets he ate what he could find when he could find it.

The place was clearly meant to be retro, with a black-and-white checkered linoleum floor and some awesome candy-cane striped booths on either side of the diner. The white walls were covered with memorabilia from the 80’s and 90’s, with the main attraction being a bumper from a DMC Delorean and a vinyl record emblazoned with Madonna’s name. There were three waitresses behind the counter, and one single other patron that looked like he was making out with a sloppy



joe he'd ordered.

Mr Stark gestured at Peter, prompting him to choose their seats, and he opted for a booth tucked into a corner. The older man immediately flagged down a waitress and she came bustling over with a huge (painfully fake) smile. "Heya! What can I get for you two today?"

"I want one of your fantastic cheeseburgers, extra cheese, and a large coffee," Mr Stark said instantly, not even glancing at the menu. "What do you want, kid? And don't even think about picking whatever's cheapest. Get yourself a drink too."

Peter blinked, dazed. He got to choose what he wanted? He hadn't even thought about that. Frantically scanning the menu, he picked the first things he saw. "Uh, can I get a chocolate milkshake and some spaghetti bolognese, um, please?"

"Sure thing hun, will that be all?" the waitress asked kindly once she'd scribbled everything into her notebook.

"Can we get a bowl of chips too? Thanks," Mr Stark added.

The waitress nodded, adding the request to her notebook before bustling away.

"Kid, why were you so surprised when I asked what you wanted?" Mr Stark asked as soon as she had left, fixing Peter with a piercing gaze.

"What? I wasn't."

"Mmhm, sure. I saw how your eyes widened. Did you just assume that I would choose your food for you?" Mr Stark asked incredulously.

Peter shrugged yet again. Jeez, he'd done that more times today than he had in his entire life.

"Damn kiddo, what the hell was your past like? Whatever, keep your secrets. I am here to help though, Peter. I *want* to help you, but I can't do that if you don't tell me some stuff. Most importantly, where you learnt to fight better than like, *all* the people I know, why you flinch whenever someone moves too fast around you and the reason some guy sent you into a fully blown panic attack on the street back there."

Peter just sat there in disbelief. Mr Stark, a literal billionaire superhero, wanted to help *him*, a weird homeless teenager that helped him out of a jam on the streets (and had some *serious* issues, may he add)? He almost told Mr Stark that he hadn't actually lived on the streets all his life, but quickly shut his mouth. He couldn't endanger the man like that, not after everything he'd done for him. He was well aware that Mr Stark could probably protect himself pretty well, but some enemies were just too big, too powerful. HYDRA was one of those enemies.

So instead, he said "I'm just your average homeless teenager, Mr Stark. There isn't anything to tell you about."

The older man looked like he was going to argue, but Peter was saved by the arrival of their food. He immediately shoved a forkful of spaghetti into his mouth to avoid answering any further questions, and Mr Stark just sighed, looking at the boy with a deep sadness in his eyes. His gaze made Peter feel weird, like someone was digging a pit in his stomach, and he realised after a while that it was guilt. After all Mr Stark had done for him, Peter wouldn't - *couldn't* - tell him the truth.

They finished their lunch and Mr Stark left a pile of crumpled \$100 bills on the table, grunting something about poor underpaid diner workers and their amazing burgers needing a break.

The short walk back to the Tower was quiet, with both of them focusing on not being run over by the heavily increasing foot traffic as they got closer to the center of the city. Soon enough, Peter could see Avengers Tower rising up in front of him. It was somehow menacing but comforting at the same time; intimidatingly large, yet somehow calming, in a familiar kind of way.

When they stepped inside the lobby, Peter's jaw dropped. He couldn't help it. The room was so *clean* , so *fancy* . He felt out of place and dirty, surrounded by sleek furniture, polished marble floors and important business people. However, Mr Stark looked completely at home, as he always did no matter where he was, and strode to an elevator in the back left corner, greeting one of the receptionists with a fond "Hey, Margie," as he went.

The ride up in the private elevator (as Mr Stark had explained when Peter shot a questioning glance at all the people waiting for another elevator when there was a perfectly good one right there) was silent, but Peter was okay with that. He needed time to get his jumbled thoughts in line, otherwise his facade would start to crack and Mr Stark might get a glimpse of the emotional instability that lay beneath.

As soon as the doors opened with a pleasant ding, Peter was hit with the sound of raucous laughter, which sent him scuttling into the back wall of the elevator, his back slamming into the metal with a loud bang.

"Tony? Is that you? What took you so long to get back?" demanded a male voice that Peter had never heard before, and therefore terrified him. His heart started pounding furiously again and his breathing sped up.

"Shit, I'm sorry Pete, I'm so sorry. I forgot they'd be here," Tony murmured to Peter gently, his tone urgent but calm. "I swear I just forgot, but it's okay, it's okay. They *will not hurt you* ."

"Tony, who the hell is that?" came the male voice again, closer this time, sending Peter further into his downward spiral.

"Shut up Clint, not right now. I am very obviously dealing with something. Go back round that corner and don't make a peep until I say otherwise. Tell the others to do the same, *quietly* ," the billionaire growled over his shoulder.

So. The voice was Clint Barton, AKA Hawkeye, AKA Dude Who Could Shoot Arrows With Pinpoint Precision And 100% Accuracy. Cool. *Coolcoolcoolcoolcool* . That was fine. Peter definitely wasn't freaking out. And Mr Stark had said *others* . There were more highly trained strangers in there. Oh God.

Once again, Mr Stark saved him from his own mind.

"Pete, I swear on my life that these guys will not hurt you. They're the nicest people I know. You're safe around them, but I'm going to give you a choice, because that always helps me when I'm panicked. Makes me feel like I have control of a situation that's overwhelming me. Now, do you want to stay in this elevator? I can have FRIDAY close the doors and it'll be just us. FRIDAY's my new AI, by the way, and she's not half bad if I say so myself. Maybe even smarter than JARVIS was. Or, we can go and have a chat with them in the common room. I swear, they won't hurt you. Or, we can walk straight past them, possibly say hi, and you can go to the spare room in my quarters and have a nap, because you sure look like you could use one. It's entirely up to you buddy," Tony said calmly.

Peter took a deep breath as Mr Stark pulled him into another hug. Huh, he really liked those.

“Can I - can I go to sleep? Please?”

“Of course, kiddo. Are you okay with stopping to say hi?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, yeah, that’d be okay. I’m sorry I did the whole... panic thing again. I just wasn’t expecting new people. They scared me. I’m sorry.”

“Okay bud, whatever you want, but if you say sorry one more time I may purposefully rupture my eardrums,” Tony said with a little grin. He helped Peter up and, keeping one arm protectively around his thin shoulders, lead him into the common room

“‘Sup guys, this is Peter. He’s pretty cool. He’ll be staying with us for a while,” Tony announced without preamble as soon as they entered.

Everyone sat there looking like they’d just witnessed an eighty-year-old man burp bubbles (in other words, shocked). And to make Peter even more terrified, literally *everyone* was there. Bruce Banner, Clint Barton, Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanov, Thor the *God of Thunder* and Sam Wilson were all sitting stiffly in their respective seats, eyes fixed on the skinny form tucked underneath Tony’s arm.

The *Avengers*.

He was in a room with the literal, real life Avengers.

Peter avoided their eyes at all costs, instead scoping out the room for all possible escape routes like he always did when he entered a new space, and right now he was in possibly the scariest new space of all time.

“Uh, hi. Sorry about... just then,” Peter stammered nervously. He really just wanted to sleep. Mr Stark had been right when he said that panic attacks took a lot out of you, and he’d had to deal with two in one day.

Clint was the first to speak up. “Hey Peter, it’s nice to meet you. Sorry about startling you earlier.”

“It’s - it’s fine.”

The rest of the Avengers went around saying their various versions of what Clint had started off with, and then Tony carted Peter off to where he’d be staying for a while, apparently.

The room was spacious, but simple, with a pleasant blue, white and tan colour palette.

“So, this is your room now, Pete,” Tony announced casually. “I’m just down the hall if you need anything, so don’t be afraid to ask. Through that door over there is a bathroom for your personal needs and... stuff. There are already some regular clothes in the drawers over there, but we can get you some more personalised, fitted ones later. For now, feel free to have a shower, get changed into cleaner clothes and go to sleep, or whatever it is you want to do.”

In response, Peter forced a smile and nodded. Mr Stark grinned awkwardly and rubbed the back of his head before backing out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Peter just ended up doing what the older man had suggested. He hadn’t had a shower in so long, and it had been even longer since he’d experienced a *hot* shower. The warm water pounded against his bare back and relaxed him almost as much as one of Mr Stark’s hugs. After toweling off and rummaging through the drawers, he managed to find a simple, white T-shirt and a pair of black track pants. The shirt hung off his shoulders, exposing his protruding collarbones, and he had to

roll the waist of the pants up multiple times to stop them from slipping down his skinny form.

Jeez, he really should eat something. He hadn't looked in a mirror in *years*, but he realised now just how underfed he was. His pale face was almost gaunt, with sharp, hollow cheekbones and an even sharper jawline. He could count every single one of his ribs, and his stomach was concave. There were still some lithe, wiry muscles visible (thank you enhancements), but not nearly as many as there used to be. He looked, to put it bluntly, unhealthy. *Very* unhealthy.

Once he was sorted, he climbed into the ridiculously large bed (why did one person need all that space?), which was the softest thing he'd ever felt, and curled into the smallest ball he could underneath the covers. He felt safe, warm and well-fed, which was a far cry from how he'd woken that morning, wet from a pipe dripping on him all night, and being shouted at by the owner of the Chinese restaurant he was sleeping behind while the gnawing pain of hunger threatened to eat a hole right through his stomach. So, knowing he was safe, he fell asleep, oblivious to the tense discussion that was happening right below him.

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As soon as the door to Peter's newly-acquired room was closed, Tony let out a huge, shuddering sigh. Feeling a sudden surge of overwhelming fatigue, he leaned his head against the wooden door and closed his eyes, losing himself to the disturbing thoughts that had been plaguing his mind ever since the kid had saved him from HYDRA.

There was something off about Peter. It had started out as nothing but an inkling of doubt, a tiny seed of dark suspicion implanted in his mind all the way back in Queens, but from there it had continued to grow steadily and exponentially with each passing interaction. The kid's complete and utter apathy to his clear lack of loved ones had been the first alarm bell. Actually no, scratch that, the *first* alarm bell had truly hit him when he'd seen Peter take out the ten HYDRA agents not just successfully, but *easily*. Like it was nothing. The kid hadn't so much as broken out into a sweat.

He'd offered the kid a place back in the Tower more out of curiosity than anything else. To some degree, he supposed, it had been a moral obligation; you couldn't exactly have someone save your life without repaying them in some sort of fashion. If he'd been older, Tony might've offered him a coffee, a few fifties to go along with it, and left it at that. But something about the kid - his deceptively skinny appearance, his obvious skill in combat, skill that clearly indicated a very long history of intensive training - had sparked Tony's curiosity, and once Tony Stark's curiosity was sparked, it was impossible to ignore. Still, he'd considered it nothing more than a favour and a potential outlet for more information about the kid. A ploy to get some answers.

But if there was one thing he hadn't expected, it was to have his questions met with nothing but more questions.

Something bad had happened to the kid, that much was painfully obvious. Tony didn't think he'd ever seen a more glaringly obvious case of the stereotypical 'traumatic childhood', and he'd seen his fair share of those - even, arguably, lived through one himself. The way Peter had tensed up back when Tony had put his arm around the kid's scarily skinny shoulders, the poorly-fabricated lies about his past, the determined avoidance of any subjects related to his family (or rather, lack thereof), the kid's obvious inexperience at simple things like holding a conversation or ordering a

meal in a diner. The evidence was all there, piled up layer by disturbing layer, yet Tony still couldn't put the pieces together and solve the puzzle of Peter's backstory. The kid was nothing but one giant mystery to him.

Tony pulled himself away from the door and straightened up again. These thoughts were becoming increasingly frustrating, melding together into one, big, irksome cycle of question after question after question, and Tony had neither the energy nor the patience to sort through them right now. Rolling out the cricks in his neck (a gesture he'd come to associate with excessive amounts of stress), Tony exhaled slowly and decided that it was time to call upon the one reliable remedy he knew he could trust in this frazzled state: coffee. He'd been deprived of his daily dose today, courtesy of HYDRA, and his dependence had become overwhelmingly apparent as his ability to function had slowly declined throughout the day. Luckily for him, his mind had been preoccupied with the Mystery Kid, so he'd been able to somewhat ignore the fatigue. Now, though, with Peter asleep and nothing to distract him from the confusing whirlwind of thoughts that plagued his brain, Tony knew that if he didn't get to a coffee joint and fast, he'd quite possibly go mad.

Right. Coffee first, thinking later.

Tony all but sprinted into the elevator, emerging onto the level of Avengers Tower that was dedicated entirely to his working quarters. Sam had complained extensively about it on more than one occasion, dubbing it as "a waste of space that could have been used for a valuable extension kitchen area". In response, Tony had dryly reminded him that, whilst baking blueberry muffins from sun-up to sun-down might be at the top of *his* priorities, the rest of the Avengers didn't share his feelings. They'd much prefer a safe collection of fifty-two Iron Man suits at the Tower over a dozen of Sam's baked goods, no matter how delicious the concoction was.

Actually, in hindsight, Tony didn't think that was the reason at all. More likely, the team just wanted somewhere for him to be banished to when they couldn't deal with his antics anymore.

I'm looking at you, Steve Rogers.

The tension in his shoulders relaxed slightly as he entered the familiar territory of his workshop. No matter how wound-up he was, the sight of his beloved suits lined up against the wall never failed to ease his mind, just a little. Tony splayed his hands open and addressed his AI.

"Suit me up, FRIDAY. And make it quick, one more second uncaffeinated and I think I might start punching walls."

"*Right away, boss,*" FRIDAY replied. Almost immediately, pieces of Tony's newest suit began sailing across the workshop and connecting with his body.

"*Might I ask the reason for this unexpected suit-up?*" FRIDAY asked almost hesitantly as a chest piece settled firmly across Tony's torso, fitting smoothly around the arc reactor.

"Coffee, FRIDAY," Tony told her. "I'm getting myself a large cup of the awake juice if it's the last thing I do."

"*Of course, boss, I gathered as much,*" FRIDAY replied apologetically, "*but why the need to suit-up? Surely you don't need to become Iron Man to use the coffee machine downstairs?*"

"I don't, but the problem is, the coffee machine's not working anymore," Tony told the AI, scowling at the memory. "Rhodey broke it last time he was here. Which reminds me, I've still gotta yell at him for that one."

“I would advise against that, boss,” FRIDAY told him as Tony caught the helmet and placed it over his head, completing the suit-up. “Sergeant Rhodes has already left you three irritated messages in regards to your absence from your prearranged meet-up with him today.”

“Oh, shit,” Tony groaned, recalling the plans he’d absent-mindedly made with Rhodey two days ago. Needless to say, the Mystery Kid dilemma had served as an unintentional distraction. “Leave him a message for me, will you? Tell him I was threatened with two almost-murders today - one of a very beloved family heirloom and one of myself - and I got distracted dealing with the aftermath. And tell him to call me tomorrow. When I’m caffeinated.”

“Of course, boss,” FRIDAY replied.

“Great,” Tony muttered. “Now, it’s time for take two on that cappuccino.”

And with that, he activated the flight power on his suit and took off, blasting away one of the windows with his repulsors to allow for a quick exit. He’d fix it later, he reasoned. Along with the coffee machine. It was one of the many perks of being a self-dubbed mechanic.

Especially when you’re a lazy piece of shit who can’t be bothered to use doors like a normal person.

It took Tony all of three minutes to fly to the local coffee shop, which was, by a rare stroke of luck, still open. Much to his irritation, however, his path to caffeine was momentarily blocked by the star-struck cashier.

“Oh my god,” the young man babbled. “Oh my god. You’re Tony Stark. You’re Iron Man. Iron Man is in my coffee shop.”

Tony sighed and suppressed an eye-roll. Clearly, taking the suit out for a fly had *not* been the smartest of choices, especially in such urgent circumstances.

Smart thinking there, Stark. Still don’t feel like playing the part of genius yet, huh?

“Yep, you got it,” he drawled, removing his helmet to talk to the man properly (although, at second glance, the *man* part of the description was questionable: he was more of a scrawny, gangly, barely-out-of-high-school teenager than anything else. Probably just a few years older than Mystery Kid). “Good for you, buddy. You’re officially the most observant person I know.”

“I - I mean - thanks,” the guy babbled.

At that point, it was all Tony could do not to knock Fanboy unconscious right then and there. If there was one thing he couldn’t deal with while uncaffeinated, it was pimply, scrawny idiots who couldn’t even recognise and appreciate sarcasm when they saw it.

“That was a joke,” Tony told the cashier, expending all of his self-control on not repulsing the guy to pieces. “Funny, you know? Ha ha ha. LOL, and all that jazz.”

“Oh - sorry - right,” Fanboy blundered, his face turning an unappealing shade of red.

If Tony had been feeling more patient, he might have tried to empathise with the teenager, or give him a much needed-lesson on the art of dry humour. As it was, the most he could do without activating his repulsors was to end the conversation quickly, and save the guy from further humiliation.

“Look, can I just grab a large cappuccino?” he asked, trying to sound somewhat civilised.

“Um - um yeah, of course!” Fanboy stammered. “Cappuccino for Tony? Or-” he hesitated, looking incredibly self-conscious, before continuing in an almost-whisper - “or *Iron Man* ?”

Someone save me from this kid.

“Tony’s fine,” Tony replied, the words causing him physical pain. To stop himself from activating his repulsors, he opened a hatch in the leg of his suit and pulled out a twenty from his pockets.

“Keep the change,” he said, passing the note over the counter.

Fanboy’s eyes widened in horror. “Oh, no! I couldn’t!”

“Actually, you could,” Tony told him, pressing the bill more firmly into Fanboy’s hand. “And you just did. Now, that cappuccino’s not going to cook itself, buddy.”

Fanboy swallowed, clearly torn between his desire to please Tony and his reluctance to accept such an unnecessarily large tip. Predictably, the former won out.

“O-okay,” he agreed nervously.

“Excellent,” Tony drawled, and he moved to the back of the shop to wait for his much-needed coffee.

Five minutes later, Tony was flying back to the Avengers Tower with a half-empty, creamy cappuccino and feeling much more relaxed than he had all day. He re-entered the building via the smashed window, ditched his suit and headed into the communal area, cradling his cup of coffee protectively in one arm.

“*Ahhh*, look who finally decides to show up,” Clint drawled as soon as Tony entered the lounge room. “Wanna explain where you’ve been all day, Tony? And why did you randomly decide to adopt a stick figure out of nowhere?”

Tony sighed, temporarily ignoring Clint’s demands as he sank into a free space on the sofa. All the Avengers were gathered in the room: Steve and Sam were sitting together on the opposite sofa; Clint was sprawled out on the floor, leaning against an armchair with Natasha lying across his legs; Bruce was perched on one of the stools facing the kitchen, and Thor (who’d obviously returned from his stay with Jane) was leaning against the wall, arms folded.

“Nope? Still nothing?” Clint demanded. “Come on man, we need some answers here.”

Tony stubbornly ignored him, instead taking a long, exaggerated sip of his coffee. He leaned against the pillows and closed his eyes, relishing in the warm buzz that tingled through all his limbs, somehow calming and energising him all at once.

“Alright, here’s the deal,” he said finally, addressing all the Avengers’ questioning gazes. “This morning, I was out walking to go and grab a coffee-”

“Oh, is that what you decided to do with yourself after your dramatic exit?” Natasha drawled pointedly, cutting him off.

“Hey, Nat, let him speak,” Bruce interjected.

“Yeah, I thought you guys wanted answers?” Tony retaliated, shooting a glare Natasha’s way. “Or should I just go?”

“No, stay,” Sam rushed to say. “Don’t leave us hanging here.”

“Even I was dragged from my morning with Jane to be questioned about your whereabouts, Stark, not that I particularly cared,” Thor grumbled. “Do us a favour and enlighten us.”

“Well, before I was so rudely interrupted, I was going to do just that,” Tony replied with a long-suffering sigh, before plunging on: “Look, this morning I was jumped by HYDRA agents.”

Tony deeply enjoyed the shocked silence that he got in response to this statement; to his deep satisfaction, the Avengers’ accusatory glares were instantly replaced with worry.

“You *what?*” Steve said after a moment, the first to break the silence.

“Just what I said, Rogers,” Tony repeated calmly. “HYDRA agents. Ten of them. Thought it’d be fun to interrupt my morning coffee with a little game of Shoot the Shit Out of Tony Stark.”

“Well - how’d you get away?” Bruce asked shakily. “With the suit, right?”

At this, Natasha snorted. “Right, the suit he left locked away in the Tower after his little temper tantrum this morning?”

Tony winced internally; out of all the Avengers, he’d known Natasha would be the one to reprimand him most severely for his serious error in judgement. “Yeah, I know, dumb decision. Won’t happen again, I promise. But no, I was surrounded and about to be killed, probably, before young Peter, the guy you just met, swooped in and saved my ass. Took all ten agents out just like that. Didn’t even break a sweat.”

Clint let out a low whistle. “Sheesh. I thought he was just your average undergrown weed. What kind of training has this kid been getting?”

“Beats me,” Tony shrugged, taking another long sip of his coffee. “I’ve been trying to get him to talk all morning. The most I could get from him was that he’s homeless, and apparently picked up a few things from the streets.”

“Well, that’s bullshit if I ever heard it,” Sam snorted.

“Yeah, I know, but he’s not telling the truth anytime soon,” Tony responded bluntly. “He won’t open up at all. Seems to be a classic case of ‘unhappy childhood’ to me.”

“Now, *those* I’m familiar with,” Natasha remarked from her position draped over Clint.

Tony nodded, draining more of his cappuccino. He was aware that many of the Avengers could probably relate to the ‘tragic-backstory’ stereotype, but they weren’t here to exchange sob stories.

“So you brought him back here?” Bruce asked after a moment. “Why?”

Tony shrugged again. “Well, he stopped me from being blasted to pieces by assault rifles, so I couldn’t exactly just leave him, could I? Plus, I was curious. I wanna know where he learned all the Karate Kid stuff.”

“But what is your long-term plan?” Thor rumbled from his position against the wall. “Do you intend to keep the boy here forever?”

Tony frowned, staring down at his coffee thoughtfully at Thor’s words. “Well, he’s homeless, so it’s not like he’s got anywhere else to go, is it?”

There was a beat in which none of the Avengers spoke. After a moment, Steve, who had been

unusually quiet during the latter part of the conversation, stood from the sofa.

“Okay,” he decided finally. “For once, I agree with Tony.”

Silence.

“*What?*” Sam, Bruce, Clint and Thor all said at once, their expressions incredulous.

“It makes sense,” Steve shrugged. “To keep the kid, I mean. He’s obviously been trained extensively in combat. We keep him here, we find out more about him, we - maybe - add another valuable member to the team.”

“Steve, did you see the same kid I saw?” Clint asked disbelievingly. “He was a stick. A *stick*, man. Probably not even in his double digits yet. There’s no way that beanstalk could be an Avenger.”

“Well, according to Tony, he took down ten HYDRA agents with ease,” Steve argued. “That sounds like Avenger-worthy material to me.”

“Yeah, Barton, let’s see you try and take on ten of HYDRA’s best,” Tony added, raising an eyebrow in Clint’s direction. “I reckon you’d get through about five before you went down.”

Clint scoffed. “Bullshit. I’d drag seven, at least.”

“You would not,” Natasha rebuked from his leg. “Six at best.”

“Five,” Tony repeated firmly. “And let’s be honest here, Romanov, you wouldn’t get much further. In fact, none of us would, period.”

Thor coughed pointedly, puffing out his chest ever-so-slightly. “I’d like to think that I’d be able to hold my own, Stark. Being, you know, the God of Thunder and all.”

Tony rolled his eyes, drinking the last dregs of his coffee. “Good for you, Storm Trooper. The point is, this kid’s barely into his teens and he knocked them all out, easy peasy. About three of them he just point-blank killed.”

Bruce paled at this. “And you’re sure it’s smart, to be taking this kid in?”

“Yeah, why not?” Tony shrugged, his jaw tightening at the implications behind Bruce’s words. “What’s the problem, Banner?”

Bruce sighed, running his hand through his hair the way he always did when he was anxious. “The *problem*,” he stressed, “is that you’re bringing an obviously highly trained person into the Tower without any qualms whatsoever. I mean, sure, he’s just a kid, but what if one of us does something to piss him off? What if he turns rogue on us, takes us out like those HYDRA agents?”

“Well, aren’t you meant to turn all big, green and scary in those situations?” Tony shot back. “I’m sure that if the kid comes at us, with your alter-ego and the Hammer-man on our side, we’d have him contained. If that even happens in the first place, which it won’t.”

“But just say it does-”

“Bruce, you’re overthinking things,” Tony interrupted, cutting Bruce off. “Cool it, alright? I’ve got it handled.”

Bruce shot him a look. “I’m sorry, Tony, but that’s what you say every time, and it’s usually right before shit descends on us all.”

“Well, trust me. This time, there will be no descension of shit,” Tony announced loudly. “It’s a simple equation. We keep the kid here, give him some food and a bed, pay him back for, you know, saving my life, not that any of you care about that, apparently. And while we’re at it, we find out where he learned to fight better than even Nat.”

Natasha scowled at him. “I was going to agree with you, but now I feel inclined to do the opposite.”

“Only speaking the truth,” Tony told her. “No offence intended.”

Natasha flipped him off.

“Alright, alright, let’s keep it calm in here,” Sam said pacifyingly. “I’m with Tony and Steve. The Peter kid can stay. He seems cool.”

“Agreed,” Clint nodded. “And the twig needs feeding up, too. Sam, cook him all the waffles under the goddamned sun tomorrow, okay?”

“You got it,” Sam replied solemnly. “All the waffles under the goddamned sun, coming right up.”

“Well, if only out of curiosity, I agree with the majority,” Thor announced decisively. “Perhaps I can show the boy Mjolnir to gain his trust.”

“Yeah, maybe don’t wave any oversized garage tools around just yet,” Tony winced, recalling Peter’s earlier reaction when he’d first seen the Avengers. “The kid’s a little...fragile at the moment. Scared him half to death when he first saw you all.”

“Yeah, we heard,” Steve muttered.

“Thor, that means no hammer throwing,” Tony added, giving the demigod a pointed glare. Thor sighed, but nodded nonetheless.

“Very well. I won’t frighten the mortal.”

“Oh, he should be so lucky,” Natasha retorted, rolling her eyes. “I’m in, by the way,” she added, giving Tony a grudging look.

Tony smirked, feeling another wave of deeply-rooted satisfaction at Natasha’s affirmation. It wasn’t every day that a man convinced Natasha Romanov to do something that wasn’t her own idea.

“Well, that’s everyone except the green guy,” he announced. “Anything you wanna say, Brucey?”

Bruce looked distinctly uncomfortable as his teammates all turned to him. Biting his lip, he ran another agitated hand through his hair.

“I - I still think it’s dangerous,” he protested weakly.

“Come *on* , Bruce,” Sam sighed. “The kid literally freaked out at the *sight* of us. He’s not attacking us any time soon.”

“Yeah, he’s even less threatening than old Barnaby,” Clint agreed.

“Hey, hey, *hey* , we’re still not talking about that,” Tony interrupted, wagging a finger at Clint. “Touchy subject, Barton.”

“Get over yourself before I punch you,” Clint muttered.

“Can’t. It’s a sensitive issue. I might never recover.”

“Alright, guys, knock it off,” Steve cut in, as Clint opened his mouth to argue further. “Bruce, are you with us or not?”

Bruce screwed his eyes shut, his expression clearly indicating that an internal dilemma was taking place in his mind. Finally, he let out a long breath and nodded shakily. “Yeah, okay. But if we all get killed in our sleep by this kid, I told you so, alright?”

“Duly noted,” Tony agreed. “You can rub it in while we all burn in the fires of hell. Right, that’s that, then. Good to see we can agree on something for once.”

His coffee cup now depressingly empty, Tony stood from the sofa and made to go downstairs, thinking that he’d get started on fixing the smashed window and then the coffee machine. The freshly-consumed caffeine was still buzzing around in his system, and whilst it was an exponentially better feeling than his previous state of suffocating fatigue, he couldn’t help but feel a pang of self-directed annoyance as he realised that there was no way he was getting any sleep whatsoever tonight.

He blamed HYDRA, he decided. If the bastards hadn’t interrupted his morning coffee trip this morning, he wouldn’t have subsequently had to finally quench his cravings far too late in the day.

“Tony, where are you going?” Steve asked as Tony absent-mindedly drifted towards the elevator.

“Workshop,” Tony called over his shoulder.

“Hold up, we’re not done,” Steve told him.

Tony swore under his breath, turning around to face the team again. Of course they weren’t done. Honestly, was a moment of solitary peace too much to ask for?

“What now?” he complained.

Steve stared at him like it should’ve been obvious. “We’ve gotta discuss HYDRA,” the man said pointedly. “You know, the organisation that attacked and almost killed you today? Don’t you see that as a pressing problem?”

“No,” Tony returned evenly, letting out a deliberate yawn despite the fact that he didn’t feel tired whatsoever. “I see that as a *tomorrow* kind of problem.”

Then, tossing his coffee cup in the trash as he passed, he exited the room and headed for the elevator.

“Tony-” Steve protested.

“*Tomorrow*,” Tony emphasised, stepping into the elevator. The doors pinged shut, and Tony breathed a sigh of relief.

He couldn’t deal with Steve Rogers’ too-perfect face right now.

Alrighty, the chapter has come to a close and the good old Irondad Spiderson fluff-fest has begun.

Also Avengers and Peter fluff-fest.

It's really just fluff. For now, at least.

Anyway, thanks for reading and feel free to leave a kudos or comment :D

The Black Widow Bites

Chapter Summary

In which Peter meets the Avengers (properly this time), is introduced to all the waffles under the sun, and forgets to wrap his knuckles.

Meanwhile, Natasha Romanov is doing some detective work, and what she finds causes suspicions to arise.

Chapter Notes

What's up guys, we're back with another chapter! Apologies for the delay, we've both been away on holiday, but we're back now and ready to continue this story. Hope you enjoy :)

Our usual disclaimers apply

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It wasn't until after sunrise that Tony Stark remembered Peter.

“*Shit*, ” he muttered aloud, abruptly dropping his screwdriver as he jumped to his feet. He'd spent the night embarking on no small manner of mechanical endeavours; first the broken window, then the coffee machine, and now a brand new Iron Man suit specifically designed to blend into the background and thus remain inconspicuous to civilians. The idea had come to him courtesy of his earlier interaction with Fanboy, and he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it sooner. Project Incognito, he'd dubbed it, and it had kept him occupied from midnight through sun-up. Now, though, he had more important issues to deal with.

Namely, the traumatised homeless kid sleeping in the spare room of his quarters.

Allowing his new project a final check-over, Tony left his workshop and took the elevator up to his private quarters. He crossed the area to the door leading to Peter's room, raised his hand and gave a hesitant knock.

“Come in,” came Peter's voice, tentative and small.

Tony opened the door and stepped inside. Peter was perched on the edge of his bed, his elbows resting on his knees as he gazed down at the carpeted floor. He appeared to be in deep thought, but at the sight of Tony he shook himself, so subtly that it was almost imperceptible.

“Hey, kiddo,” Tony greeted casually, leaning against the doorframe as he spoke. “How'd you sleep?”

“Good,” Peter replied, in that monotone voice of his. Then, as an afterthought, the kid added, “Um, thanks for the bed. It was really nice.”

Tony scoffed lightly. “No problem kid, but just for future reference, no need to thank me for giving

you a bed,” he told Peter. “It’s kind of a basic human need, you know.”

Peter nodded quickly, and Tony instantly regretted his words. He’d intended to break the ice with some light-hearted humour, but now he realised that the quip about the bed probably hadn’t been the best of moves, what with Peter’s homeless situation and all. Inwardly, he kicked himself.

Face it. You’re not cut out for this, Stark.

Ignoring the derisive voice in the back of his head, Tony cleared his throat and tried again.

“Anyway, you wanna come downstairs and grab some breakfast? I hear Sam’s making you a hell of a lot of waffles, and I gotta say, that’s not something you want to miss out on.” Catching sight of Peter’s uncertain face, he quickly added, “but if you still don’t want to see the team yet, that’s totally cool too. I can just grab the waffles, bring them up here, and everything will be A-OK.”

Peter swallowed, his face paling slightly, but after a moment he nodded. “No, it’s okay. I can, um, I can come downstairs with you.”

The wavering note in Peter’s voice indicated otherwise, but Tony ignored this. He *had* offered the kid a choice, after all, and the kid had chosen to meet the team. It would be hypocritical of him to withdraw the offer now.

“Sure thing,” he agreed easily. “Let’s head on down. I can practically smell those waffles already.”

“Okay,” Peter said, slipping off the bed and crossing the room to Tony’s side. Tony led the way out of his room and back into the elevator. A few seconds later, he and Peter emerged into the Avengers’ communal area.

“Tony! Nice to see you’ve finally decided to rejoin the land of the living-” Clint’s voice was cut off abruptly as he caught sight of the skinny kid half-hidden behind Tony. “Oh, is that Peter I see?”

Tony felt Peter tense up a little behind him, but he gave the kid an encouraging nod and Peter hesitantly stepped out from behind Tony.

“Um, yeah,” he nodded. “It’s me.”

“Good to see you again, kid,” Clint grinned.

Peter offered a small smile in return. It didn’t quite reach his eyes, but it was still an improvement from the blank, emotionless mask Tony had been presented with yesterday.

Okay, so it’s baby steps with this kid.

Taking the lead, Tony moved forwards and collapsed onto the sofa, gesturing for Peter to sit beside him. The kid complied, sitting down on the free space next to Tony.

Clint and Natasha were the only other Avengers in the living room. From the delicious, mouth-watering scent emanating from the kitchen, Tony deduced that Sam had, in fact, followed up on his promise to make Peter waffles.

“Where’s the others?” Tony asked.

“Bruce is helping Sam cook,” Clint replied. “Steve’s off for his morning run-”

“Of course he is,” Tony muttered darkly.

“-and Thor’s still asleep, probably.”

“Actually, no,” Natasha supplied from the opposite sofa. “He just woke up.” She jerked her head in the direction of the elevator, and Tony turned to see a dishevelled-looking Thor stretching his arms as he yawned hugely.

“Morning, Point Break,” Tony greeted.

“Good morning, Stark,” Thor replied, his gruff voice rough with the remnants of sleep.

“You look like shit,” Clint observed as Thor stumbled his way over to the couch and half-fell, half-tripped onto a space next to Natasha.

“I feel a similar way,” Thor grumbled. “I found myself trapped in a painfully vivid dream last night, in which I was ravenous but unable to eat anything. It was excruciating.”

“That’s almost as bad as Tony’s farm dream,” Natasha declared.

“Excuse me,” Tony protested. “My dream doesn’t even fit the *bad* category. Any dream involving humour at Rogers’ expense is one of delight, not pain.”

“Until that person decides to recount said dream to everyone, and then storm out when nobody laughs and gets attacked by HYDRA as a result,” Natasha told him dryly.

Tony sighed. “You’re never gonna let me forget that one, are you?”

“Never.”

“Speaking of HYDRA, I rudely forgot to greet you, Peter,” Thor announced, who had just noticed Peter’s presence beside Tony. “Forgive my discourtesy. Good morning, saver of Tony Stark’s life.”

Peter, who had tensed up immediately at Thor’s unexpected entrance, and then even more so when they mentioned yesterday’s debacle, looked mildly surprised at this, but accepted the title. “Good morning, Thor,” he ventured cautiously, relaxing slightly.

“Oh yeah, we heard about how you kicked those HYDRA agents’ asses,” Clint told Peter, his eyes gleaming with awe and failing to notice how the kid tensed up again. Some superspy he was.

“Good on you, kid. That’s one better than any of us could ever do. Where’d you learn your skills?”

Tony barely refrained from rolling his eyes at this. God, Clint Barton was smart, but severely lacking in the subtlety department. If they were going to find out Peter’s history, blatant and direct questioning wasn’t the way to do it. He’d already tested that tactic himself, to no avail.

Then again, Clint’s not the one who just told a homeless kid the importance of sleeping in a bed, is he?

Quickly dragging himself back to the present, Tony watched Peter as the kid formulated a response. Even though he knew Clint’s questioning was futile, he had to admit, he was at least somewhat interested to hear Peter’s reply.

“Um, I dunno,” Peter answered eventually. “I learned some stuff from the streets, and - things.”

Oh. So he was still sticking with that poorly-fabricated lie, then. Tony almost felt sorry for the kid; if it wasn’t ethically questionable, he’d probably give Peter some much-needed lessons on the art of believable deception.

Unfortunately, Clint was persistent. “As if,” he said, grinning at what he obviously thought was Peter’s attempt at a joke. “Come on, kid. HYDRA’s pretty lethal. You don’t learn how to take

down ten of them *on the streets*. ”

Even though Clint’s reaction was practically a carbon copy of how Tony had responded to Peter’s story the previous day, he couldn’t help but feel a hypocritical wave of frustration towards the archer. This was getting them *nowhere*. Thankfully, Natasha stepped in before Tony could release the stream of curses that had been steadily building up inside of him. She laid a cautionary hand on Clint’s knee, giving him a warning glance before speaking.

“I’m sure Peter has his ways,” she said, her tone clear and deliberate. “Who knows? The streets could have given him enough skills to take on those agents.”

It was an obvious lie, and from Natasha’s face Tony could tell that even she didn’t believe it herself, but the effect on Peter was palpable: he visibly relaxed, his muscles loosening at Natasha’s words. Tony glanced at Natasha again, trying to gage what the woman was playing at, but her eyes were fixed on Peter. She had a shrewd, calculating look about her, a look that Tony recognised.

It was the Natasha Romanov special, otherwise notoriously known as the You’re-Transparent-And-I’m-Seeing-Right-Through-You look. Usually, she reserved that look for Tony, specifically for whenever he’d crafted some feeble excuse as to why he couldn’t be bothered to attend one of the team’s many group training sessions. This time, though, it was directed at Peter, and although her gaze wasn’t accusatory, it was definitely piercing.

Apparently, Natasha had figured Peter out. Tony wasn’t even surprised - if anyone was going to debunk the Mystery Kid’s big mystery, it was the superspy of the group (Clint barely counted as a spy). He resolved to talk to her about it later.

“Okay, breakfast is served,” Sam announced from the kitchen, dragging Tony once more back to the present.

“Let’s go get those waffles, kid,” Tony grinned at Peter. Together, the pair of them shuffled into the kitchen, trailing after Natasha and Clint.

“Hey, Peter,” Sam said when he caught sight of the kid. “Help yourself.”

Peter hesitated, but only momentarily; the sight of the food appeared to trump any qualms he might have had, for he grabbed a plate and filled it with three fluffy waffles. The rest of the Avengers did the same, although their plates were significantly larger than Peter’s; Thor alone had a stack of waffles so high it almost hit the ceiling as he carried it back to the living room.

Tony served himself last, grabbing a sizable pile of waffles and dousing them in maple syrup and whipped cream. He turned to Sam, opening his mouth for his usual demand, but the man beat him to it.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve got your cereal,” Sam sighed, rolling his eyes as he passed the bowl of Nutri-Grain to Tony. “Honestly, man, I don’t get why you eat that crap.”

“That crap? *That crap?*” Tony repeated, raising his eyes incredulously at Sam. “Wilson, did you just insult my cereal? *My cereal*, imported all the way from damned Australia? *My cereal*, that I helped campaign for? *My cereal*, of which I came up with the slogan-”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Sam interrupted exasperatedly. “You like your cereal. In fact, I’d say you have an unhealthily possessive obsession with it-”

“Don’t go into shrink mode on me, Wilson,” Tony warned, wagging a finger at Sam.

“It kinda seems like you need one,” Sam muttered under his breath.

By way of response, Tony took a large spoonful of Nutri-Grain and shovelled it slowly and deliberately into his mouth.

“My cereal,” he reaffirmed, before picking up his plate of waffles and re-entering the living room.

Tony sat down on the sofa next to Peter, who was tentatively picking at his stack of waffles as the Avengers around him completely devoured their own plates of food. By the expression on the kid’s face, it was clear that Peter had never experienced the luxury of a morning stack of waffles before, and Tony was determined to make Peter’s first indulgence a memorable one.

“Kid, you haven’t even got any syrup with that,” he noticed, shaking his head in disapproval. “Cardinal sin, bud. Here, look-” Tony stood up and grabbed the bottle of maple syrup from Thor, who was practically chugging the thick liquid down his throat without a care in the world, and doused a sizable amount over Peter’s waffles. “Try that, it makes them ten times better.”

“Excuse me,” Thor demanded, clearly affronted. “Can I have my syrup back, mortal?”

Tony rolled his eyes, but tossed the bottle at Thor nonetheless. “There you go, oh high and mighty ruler of Asgard. I apologise for my crime against the throne and beg thee for mercy.”

Thor grinned, and happily returned to chugging maple syrup.

“So, Peter,” Sam said, as Tony began shovelling down spoonfuls of Nutri-Grain. “We heard what you did for Tony. Pretty cool, if you ask me.”

“We’ve already had this conversation, Wilson,” Clint remarked in between bites of waffles. “While you were off cooking your waffles. Long story short, the kid’s a hotshot who learned karate on the streets.”

Tony blinked, taken aback at Clint’s surprising ability to sound believable. Of course, neither Sam nor Bruce would buy it, but they were both more adept at picking up on social cues than Clint, and neither of them questioned the lie.

“Oh, right,” Sam said lightly, quickly switching gears. “Yeah, well anyway, I was gonna ask if you wanted to head to the training area today, show us some of your moves? We could learn a lot from you, you sound like you know what you’re doing.”

Peter shrugged, his expression a combination of apprehensive and proud. “Um, yeah. I mean, sure. But aren’t you guys, like, I dunno, really good already?”

“I guess you could say that, but only in our trained areas,” Sam explained. “You’re good at a lot from what Tony’s told us, and you’d give us a whole new perspective on fighting. Maybe help us get some leverage over HYDRA.”

“Oh,” Peter replied, clearly surprised. “Well, yeah. I guess I could show you guys some stuff.” He sounded hesitant, as though the very idea was ridiculous. Tony surmised that the kid wasn’t used to receiving compliments about his fighting techniques - or maybe he just felt uncomfortable at the idea of having to adopt the role of teacher, rather than student. That made sense, because the more time Tony spent with this kid, the more he realised that there was no way Peter *hadn’t* had a teacher, someone skilled in combat, teaching him the techniques. The million-dollar question, of course, was who had filled the role.

Yet another mystery to add to the kid of mysteries.

“Cool,” Sam grinned. “I look forward to it.”

Having finished his bowl of Nutri-Grain, Tony turned his attention to his waffles, relishing in the delicious combination of syrup, cream and perfectly-cooked waffle.

“Guys, should we call Steve?” Bruce suggested after a minute or two. “Let him know the waffles are disappearing fast?”

“No,” Tony replied immediately. “Rogers won’t be back for a while. Isn’t his minimum running time, like, two hours?”

“Three, these days,” Sam corrected, rolling his eyes. “He still makes me run with him, sometimes. It’s embarrassing.”

Soon, the living room was filled with the Avengers’ usual morning banter, the mood remained light-hearted as the number of waffles steadily declined. Peter was mostly quiet, choosing to focus instead on indulging in the waffles, which he seemed to enjoy, much to Tony’s satisfaction. He even went back for seconds and thirds, although Tony had been forced to brush off his questioning glance for permission.

“Kid, you’re currently eating a meal with a literal half-god,” Tony said. “You want some leftovers, you gotta snag them fast.” That had been enough for Peter, who had stood up and happily re-filled his plate. The notion that the kid had wanted to ask *permission* for seconds didn’t sit right in Tony’s stomach, not by a long shot, but he’d just added it to the ever-growing list of Disturbing Facts About Peter. Soon, when he had some time alone, he was going to decipher that list, Tony vowed. Although, maybe some serious help from Natasha was in order.

After breakfast, Clint and Bruce grudgingly accepted their shift as dishwashers, whilst the rest of the Avengers went their separate ways. Thor had plans to meet up with Jane (again), Steve returned from his run to shower and eat the leftover waffles, and Sam wanted to spend some time with Peter in the training area.

“Seriously, I could learn a lot from you, kid,” Sam said earnestly. “Whaddaya say?”

Peter still looked hesitant, but true to his word he agreed to Sam’s offer. “Okay, sure,” he answered nervously.

“It’ll be fun, trust me,” Sam reassured him.

“You mind if I tag along?” Natasha asked, walking casually over to where Tony, Peter and Sam sat. “I’d love to see your moves, Peter.”

“Um, yeah, sure,” Peter agreed.

Tony rubbed a tired hand over his face, considering his options. On the one hand, the kid was seriously out of his element, and it would probably be smart to go with him, in case he freaked out again in front of Sam and Natasha. On the other hand, the former *was* a self-proclaimed therapist, and he’d probably be able to deal with a spontaneous panic attack better than Tony ever could, despite his first-hand experience. Plus, Tony was exhausted from the all-nighter, and he’d promised to meet up with Rhodey.

Okay. So he’d leave Peter with Sam and Natasha, make some coffee, and then deal with Rhodes. He felt a little uneasy at the prospect of leaving Peter with the other two, but quickly ignored this. If Peter was going to be staying at the Tower for a long period of time, he had to build healthy relationships with the other Avengers, not just Tony.

Can't have the kid all to yourself. Boo-hoo, Tony.

Mentally shaking himself once more, Tony addressed Peter. "You gonna be right if I leave you guys to it?" he asked, watching the kid carefully for any outward displays of aversion to this idea. "I've got some stuff I need to clear up."

Peter paled a little at this, but he set his jaw and swallowed determinedly. "Yeah. I'll be fine, Mr Stark."

"Okay. Come by the workshop if you need me. Sam will show you the way."

Peter nodded, before following Sam and Natasha out of the room and into the elevator. As the doors closed, Tony saw Sam making a light joke to Peter, who gave another small smile in response.

The kid was going to be fine with them.

With this small seed of reassurance in his mind, Tony got up and set about making two cappuccinos - one for himself, and one for Rhodey. He figured the best way to appease the man would be with a large cup of caffeine.

Once finished, he took the two coffees and headed downstairs into his workshop. As soon as he entered, he was greeted with FRIDAY's cool announcement: "*Sergeant Rhodes is downstairs in the lobby, boss. He is waiting for you.*"

"Super. Tell him to meet me up here," Tony commanded.

"Right away, boss."

Five minutes later, a very angry-looking Rhodey entered the workshop. At the sight of Tony, he stalked over and folded his arms, glaring at his friend.

"You wanna explain where the hell you've been?" he demanded.

Tony winced, holding out his peace offering. "Coffee?"

Rhodey scowled, but accepted the beverage and took a long, exaggerated sip. "There. I drank your coffee. And I'm not any less pissed off."

Tony sighed. "Damn it. Worth a try. Anyway, look Rhodey, I know you think I ditched you for no reason, but if you got FRIDAY's message-"

"Oh yeah, I got that," Rhodey glared. "Some bullshit about the death of a treasured family heirloom?"

"Barnaby," Tony confirmed, unable to help himself. "And yeah, that was one thing. But there was also the minor issue of me being attacked and almost killed by HYDRA agents."

There we go. Tony watched with satisfaction as all the anger drained out of Rhodey's face, to be replaced by confused concern.

"For real?" he asked, eyebrows raised. "This isn't some stitch-up?"

"No stitch-up," Tony replied. "They had me cornered in the street, about ten of them, and I didn't have my suit. I would've been toast if it wasn't for the kid."

"The kid?" Rhodey repeated, his confusion only increasing.

“Yeah, this homeless kid called Peter showed up and basically kicked all their asses,” Tony explained, gulping down a long sip of cappuccino as he spoke. “I brought him back here, gave him a room. He’s in the training area with Sam and Nat now.”

“Well, goddamn,” Rhodey complained. “And here I was thinking you were just being a terrible friend.”

“Me? Terrible friend? Never,” Tony protested.

“I dunno, Tony, you don’t exactly have a great track record,” Rhodey argued, but he was grinning. “So, a guy called Peter saved your skin, huh? How was he able to fight off ten HYDRA agents?”

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Tony told him, walking casually over to his workbench and placing his coffee cup next to the bare-bones of the Incognito Suit. “I’ve been trying to figure it out this whole time. The rest of the team are just as stumped as I am. Then again, Nat looks like she might have a clue.”

“She usually does,” Rhodey agreed, following Tony over to the workbench. “What’s this you’re working on? New suit?”

Tony grinned. He’d been waiting for Rhodey to ask, and was immensely satisfied that he had; Tony was a sucker for showing off his inventions. “Meet Project Incognito,” Tony announced, holding up the piece of metal he’d been sculpting into a chest piece.

“Jesus, what is this?” Rhodey frowned, staring at the unusually non-theatrical suit. “You trying to take a leaf out of Nat’s book, or something? Go all Men In Black on us?”

“Let’s just say, I’ve had enough of dealing with unwanted attention from random strangers,” Tony declared, carefully replacing the suit on the workbench.

Rhodey raised his eyebrows skeptically. “Tony, you love attention.”

“Not from pimply undersized fanboys, I don’t.”

“Oh, so this is personal, then?” Rhodey realised, bending over to inspect the suit more thoroughly. “Well, let me just say, you’re gonna have a hard time going completely undercover. Doesn’t matter if the suit’s black, or bright yellow, people still freak when they see Iron Man.”

“Exactly,” Tony nodded. “That’s why we add a layer of reflective material, cover it with some completely transparent glass, and then a light-absorption panel for good measure.”

Rhodey paused. “You’re saying you wanna turn invisible.”

“Basically, yeah,” Tony shrugged.

It didn’t take long to explain the logistics of the suit to Rhodey, who although not a genius by any means, was intelligent enough to follow the basic principles of engineering. They spent the next few hours working together in the workshop, Rhodey acting as Tony’s assistant as he continued to assemble the new suit. By the time the clock hit midday, it was almost completely finished, save for the headpiece.

“Thanks for that, Rhodes,” Tony said as they re-entered the elevator. “You’re maybe better at building stuff than I gave you credit for.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes, but didn’t retaliate. “You’re welcome, Tony. Now I gotta fly for this

meeting with the Head of Weaponry.”

“You do that,” Tony told him. The elevator doors opened with a ping, and he stepped out. “Have fun.”

“You too,” Rhodey responded. The doors closed shut, and he disappeared from view.

Tony sighed, tossing his empty coffee cup in the trash as he wandered over to the entrance to the training area. He was feeling a lot more relaxed after his morning session with Rhodey, and a lot more awake after his coffee. In fact, he was fairly confident that when he next saw the kid, he’d be able to get through at least one conversation without screwing something up in some way.

With that thought in mind, Tony opened the doors to the training room.

Only to find it bare and empty.

Oh. The kid must have already wrapped up his training, then. That was cool. That was fine. Tony would just take the elevator back up to the communal area, and find him hanging out with Sam and Nat-

Except he wasn’t. The room was similarly empty, save for Bruce, who was watching a rerun of some football match from a couple years back.

“Bruce, have you seen Peter around?” Tony asked.

“Nope. The last I heard, he was down training with Sam and Nat,” Bruce offered helpfully, though his tone wasn’t very certain.

“Yeah, but he’s not there,” Tony said, trying to ignore the irrational fear that was creeping up his spine as he spoke, turning his limbs to ice.

Jesus, Stark. Get it together.

“Oh,” Bruce frowned. “Well, I’m sure he’s around.”

Tony didn’t answer. He was already heading for the elevator. If Peter wasn’t training and he wasn’t in the communal area, then the only logical location left was his private quarters. That made sense, right? He’d go down there, and find Peter having another nap in the spare room-

But once again, Tony was met with a disturbingly devoid-of-Peter room when he reached his quarters. The panic was starting to fully set in now, and he willed himself to stay calm. Just because he couldn’t find Peter, didn’t mean the kid wasn’t around. After all, he hadn’t seen Sam or Nat, either. If he could find them, they’d surely know where the kid was.

Tony re-entered the elevator and took it up to the level where Natasha’s quarters were, drumming his fingers impatiently on the button panel as the machine climbed. The doors opened with a familiar ping, and he stepped out and hurried down the hallway. Reaching the door to Natasha’s rooms, he raised a fist and knocked.

“Nat? You there?” He could barely keep the urgency out of his voice.

The door opened, revealing Natasha Romanov’s face. She looked pale and her stance was oddly rigid, and immediately Tony knew that something was wrong.

“Where’s Peter?” he demanded.

He knew what she was going to say a second before she did.

“Gone.”

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The elevator ride was awkward, something that any normal person would surely notice. Peter, however, was stuck inside his own mind, and trying not to spiral further as he attempted to calm himself down. He didn't need Mr Stark with him at all times - he wasn't a *baby*. He'd survived six months alone on the streets for God's sake, and twelve years at HYDRA (apparently his parents had surrendered him to the organisation when he was three, and he'd been under HYDRA's 'care' until he was fifteen. Of course, he'd learnt that nothing HYDRA said could be trusted, but he didn't know what else to believe).

He could survive a little training session with two Avengers.

Sam was a warm, friendly guy, and from what Peter had heard, he flew around in a wingsuit, which was *awesome*, and he was kind of jealous. He could only imagine how freeing flying would feel.

Sam filled the empty silence during the short ride with endless chatter. He was like Mr Stark in that respect, but his chatter didn't have curious undertones. Sam just... *talked* - about anything and everything, with no purpose, no intention behind his words. It was odd, but refreshing. He was so used to having to constantly analyse everything spoken to him in order to unearth their true meaning, that hearing about how Clint had set Sam's slippers on fire, and the ensuing prank war, was weird.

Natasha on the other hand, remained silent all throughout the elevator ride and the short walk to the training room. Peter didn't think she liked him very much, if her calculating glares and cold shoulders were anything to go by. He was fine with that, as long as she didn't know anything about him and his past, she could dislike him all she wanted. It wasn't safe for anyone to know anything about him, not to mention that the Avengers would most likely kick him out, or worse, if they found out he was an ex-HYDRA agent.

Unfortunately for Peter, his luck was dismal, at best, and he was almost certain she had at least a small inkling of where he came from and how he learnt to fight the way he did. The only question was, how long would it take before she acted upon that inkling?

The training room was huge. Peter supposed it had to be, what with the endless stream of superheroes, some enhanced, that wandered in and out of the place. The equipment was top of the line, and while HYDRA was certainly not struggling financially, they'd never had this level of high-class equipment, or at least, not where he had been trained.

There was half a wall dedicated to weights, a running track around the rim of the room, a padded mat for combat training in the centre, a jungle gym, a group of chains suspended from the ceiling to hang punching bags on, climbing ropes, a rock wall, an archery range and a gun range, as well as a corner dedicated solely to basic exercise machines like treadmills and ellipticals.

He allowed himself a few seconds to gawk, before returning his face to the blank slate expression that he'd been trained to wear at all times, lest he show weakness to possible enemies. He was still trying to break the habit of slipping into that unflappable husk of a person whenever he felt

nervous, and he felt *very* nervous now. Natasha was giving him a deadly side-eye, and Sam was looking at him expectantly, like Peter was the next act to a show he had so far enjoyed.

The boy stood at the very entrance of the training room, shifting uncomfortably and waiting for someone else to make the first move. It was a relief when Sam suggested that they head to the changing rooms and get into clothes that were better suited for exercise, because the pajamas that they were currently sporting probably wouldn't cut it.

Peter scampered off towards the men's room without any resistance, eager to get away from Natasha, who had her own personal changing room. He was sure that Natasha knew *something* about him was off, but he didn't know how much she actually knew, and how much of it was guesswork. Would she confront him about it in front of the other Avengers? Would they force him to leave? Would they hate him for lying? And what would Mr Stark think?

Forcing himself out of that particularly uncomfortable spiral of thoughts, he accepted the clothes offered to him by Sam and changed quickly. He'd deal with whatever Natasha threw at him when she did so, and not a moment before. He couldn't focus on that when he needed to impress Sam enough that he'd let him stay at the Tower.

That's why he was here, after all - so that he could assist the Avengers when they needed him.

He'd awoken early that morning, and while waiting for Mr Stark to let him out of his room, he'd put some real thought into his situation. Those thoughts had led to several hits to his self-esteem, but ultimately he'd come to a conclusion that he was fairly confident in - Mr Stark had seen what a valuable asset he could be, and wanted his skills, plain and simple. Why else would a genius, superhero, billionaire waste their priceless time and resources on a scraggly homeless kid that saved their ass once? It wasn't like he deserved anything that Mr Stark had done for him, not after all of the things he'd done in HYDRA's name.

The shirt Sam had given him was too big, draping off of his skinny form like a wilted flower. The track pants were also too big, but that was fixed easily enough by tightening the strings around the waist. Luckily, the shoes and socks fit reasonably well, because training in shoes that didn't fit was a whole other plane of uncomfortable that he didn't want to visit.

The trio reconvened ten minutes later in the centre of the combat mat, and collectively decided to do some warm-ups before seeing what Peter could bring to the table.

They jogged around the room a few times, Peter in the lead, followed closely by Natasha, and then Sam a few meters behind them. When they'd finished, Peter hadn't broken a sweat, Natasha seemed outwardly unaffected (although he could hear her heart beating faster than normal), and Sam was a little out of breath, but clearly trying to hide it. That was followed by the basics of every warm-up: burpees, lunges, sit-ups, push-ups and squats.

It was hell. Peter may have spent every day for the past twelve years doing some variation of those exercises, and it may have been easy as pie, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

Once the torture was over, Nat and Sam took Peter on loop of the training room to see what he could do. They had him run as many laps as he could before he felt too out of breath to continue - he stopped at seven, although he definitely could have continued for longer. Thanks to Mr Stark, they already knew he could fight like a bat out of hell, but they didn't know he was *enhanced*, and he desperately wanted to keep it that way.

After that, they tested him on how he handled a gun, forcing Peter to pretend that he had absolutely no idea how to hold the thing. He knew that he could probably shoot a fly off of someone's head

from two-hundred yards away, but what kind of homeless kid knew how to use a gun like that?

He'd wrapped his hands around the weapon clumsily, and aimed it at the center of the target, not bothering to perfect his stance or brace for the impact he knew would come once he fired it. He ended up clipping the very edge of the target, and getting thrown onto his butt from the recoil of the shot, just like he'd planned. Sam bought the act and offered him a few pointers, but Natasha just crossed her arms and looked at him suspiciously. When they locked eyes, Peter felt like the woman was trying to stare into his soul, or maybe read his mind. The scary thing was, he didn't doubt she could do either.

Sam directed him towards a punching bag that had been strung up in advance, and Peter went at it, limiting the force of his punches greatly (he had a feeling that if he punched the bag hard enough to cave a human skull in, Natasha and Sam might start to suspect something was up).

He wasn't even two punches in when Sam stopped him, the expression on his face one of horror. "Wait, wait, wait. What are you doing? You've gotta wrap your knuckles, Squirt!" the man told him, concerned.

Oh, so *that* was what had Sam's knickers in a knot? Peter didn't see why it was such a big deal. He hadn't wrapped them at HYDRA and that hadn't turned out too badly - he'd just gotten a few scrapes on his knuckles, before the skin toughened up enough to resist the force of his punches.

"It supports all the joints in your arm, *and* it protects your hand from injuries," Sam explained, noting Peter's confused expression.

The boy just shrugged in response. He still didn't see the point of it, but arguing was more trouble than it was worth, so he hastily grabbed the wrap that Sam was offering out to him and followed along as the man showed him how to do it, trying to ignore how *unnatural* it felt.

They took turns holding the bag for each other while Natasha watched silently, and Peter felt himself beginning to ease up, despite the woman's frightening presence. It had been a long time since he'd allowed himself to relax, but with each satisfying thump of his fist against the shiny material of the punching bag, he felt himself beginning to loosen.

After a few more minutes of watching Peter beat the crap out of the poor punching bag, Natasha stopped him. "I'd like to see how you do in a proper combat situation, Peter. Are you okay with fighting Sam?" she asked slyly, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Peter nodded slightly and half-shrugged, keenly aware that there wasn't really much he could do to say no. Sam practically *wiggled* with childish glee before taking off towards the mat. Natasha followed at a slower pace, narrowing her eyes at Peter as she passed. Peter gulped, before hesitantly walking over to the mat and shifting his body into a loose fighting stance, facing Sam, who was shaking his limbs out so vigorously they looked like jelly, and Peter had to struggle to contain his laughter.

Natasha told them to get set, and Sam dropped into his own ready position, and that was when Peter knew he would win. The holes in Sam's defences would be easy to get around, and Peter had already planned his attack before Natasha blew the whistle to signify they could start.

Peter lunged, ducking under Sam's well-aimed, but ultimately futile fist, and getting into his personal space. From there, all he had to do was sweep a leg under the man's feet, and Sam was down, lying on his back on the mat and trying to suck in a breath despite his spasming diaphragm.

The man was nothing if not resilient though, and he tried again and again to best Peter, or at least



last longer than a few seconds, while Natasha watched shrewdly from the sidelines. After five rounds, he had to admit defeat, and excused himself to go fill up his water bottle. “Maybe you can have a crack at him, Nat,” Sam said as he jogged out of the training room.

As soon as the door swung shut behind the man, Natasha fixed Peter with a glare that had probably destroyed many strong men before Peter had ever had the displeasure of feeling its heat. Luckily for him, he’d spent his entire life on the receiving end of many similarly terrifying glares, and was practically immune to them at this point.

He knew Natasha thought something was fishy about him, and so he didn’t bother pretending to wither under her gaze, instead straightening his spine and arranging his expression into his emotionless mask, which he’d come to depend upon when faced with situations he really didn’t want to be in.

“So, which HYDRA branch are you from, hmm?” the woman asked bluntly. “The one in Latvia? Russia? One of the Pacific bases?”

Peter prided himself on suppressing his flinch at the mention of the organisation that had ruined his life, but inside he was screaming. Loudly. He had suspected that Natasha had some clue about who he was and what his past entailed, but he didn’t think her guesses would be so on the nose. What happened now? Would she tell the others? Would they make him leave?

“How long have you been training to kill us?” she spat, her tone accusatory. Peter reeled at the question - she thought he was here to *kill the Avengers*? Before he could deny it, she plowed on. “I bet you thought you were so subtle, but the very *minute* you stepped into the common room, I knew you were HYDRA. I saw the way you committed every possible escape route to memory like it was a reflex and assessed the threat-level of every person as soon as you encountered them. I saw your fighting style, the way you adjusted flawlessly to every move Sam made. I was *raised* by HYDRA. I know HYDRA *inside and out*. I recognise the signs left behind by their training, the scars, the flinching. I can’t believe they thought they could send you here without me noticing,” she hissed furiously.

Peter was scared now, genuinely piss-his-pants terrified. He couldn’t believe that Natasha thought he could ever kill one of the Avengers, let alone all of them, He couldn’t do that to the people who had shown him so much kindness and asked so few questions about his questionable situation. Apparently she wasn’t as right about him as he thought she’d been.

“You’re a child, so I’ll spare your life this time, but you’re going to leave and never come back. If you *ever* show your face here again, I will personally tear you limb from limb. This is my family, and if you touch so much as *one* hair on their heads, you will not live to see the next day,” she said, her voice dangerously calm.

Peter’s mind was frozen on one word. *Leave, leave, leave*. She was going to make him leave the only place he’d ever felt welcomed, because she thought he wanted to kill the people who had welcomed him.

He tried to say something, shake his head - *just do something* to show that he wasn’t here because of that, that he’d never, ever do *that*. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not move under Natasha’s cold, hard glare. He hadn’t been intimidated by it before, but her words had been like a knife straight to the heart, and they’d made his knees shake and his head spin.

When Peter still didn’t make a move, Natasha snarled, except she wasn’t Natasha anymore. She was the Black Widow, a deadly, hardened assassin who could give Peter a run for his money if it came down to hand-to-hand combat. So, he took a slow step towards the closest window, and then

another, and then another, until his palms were pressed against the glass. His breath was coming harshly in his throat, and his thoughts were wreaking havoc inside his head. There was just too much, everything was too much.

He couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Not with Natasha's cold, cold eyes on him, not as she corralled him closer and closer to the window with each step she took towards him.

And then everything reached a climax, and Peter just had to get away, so he flipped the latch and gracefully launched himself out of the window, no longer caring about maintaining the "I'm normal" charade. To her credit, the only hint that Natasha was surprised to see him sticking to the side of Stark Tower was the slight widening of her eyes.

"Enhanced," she whispered to herself, and Peter could only hear her above the roaring wind thanks to his super-hearing. But then her face hardened once again, and she made a shooing motion with her hand. Peter leapt off the side of the tower, and found himself plummeting towards the ground.

In that brief amount of time while he was falling, he thought about Mr Stark, the man showed him kindness when no one else would. Would he even miss Peter's presence? Probably not, once Natasha told the man that the homeless kid he'd picked up off the streets was a HYDRA assassin, sent to kill them all. Mr Stark would never know that it wasn't true, and he'd never get to know how grateful Peter was towards him, for being the first, and probably only person that Peter would ever be able to trust.

He hit the roof of a neighbouring building - which was significantly shorter- hard, and pulled off a perfect roll to absorb the impact, ignoring the gravel that dug into his back.

He could see Natasha's flaming red hair poking out of the window of the training room high above him, watching as she always did. He could practically feel her eyes boring into his face, and so he turned and did something he had foolishly hoped would stop now that Mr Stark had offered him a chance to rebuild his life.

He ran.

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"*Gone?* What do you mean, *gone?* Gone how, Nat?"

Tony was rambling, he could feel it, but it couldn't be helped. Word vomit was just one of his uncontrollable nervous habits.

"Just what I said," Natasha replied coolly. "He's gone. He left."

"Yeah, so you keep telling me!" Tony exploded. They were standing outside on Natasha's private balcony, the morning New York sun shining down on them.

It was ironic, really, how the perfect weather contrasted with the raging storm that was gripping Tony's insides.

"Well, I don't know what else you want me to say," Natasha continued, her tone cold and unyielding as she held Tony's gaze. "You brought a homeless kid into the Tower, one that you barely knew, and he decided to leave. Really, what else were you expecting?"

“Not this!” Tony yelled, all his stress cultivating into one big ball of reckless fury. “I *expected* you guys to take care of him like you said you would, train with him, and then bring him back in one piece! I didn’t expect to come back and find him missing, for God’s sake!”

“Tony, you obviously cared about him a lot,” Natasha replied steadily, “but I want you to ask yourself-”

“*Care*,” Tony corrected furiously. “Present tense, not past. That kid saved my damned life, in case you forgot, and I’m not about to let him go back to living on the streets just because you two scared him off, or whatever-”

“He’s HYDRA,” Natasha interrupted suddenly. “Did you know that, Tony? Did you know that your precious little saviour is a trained HYDRA agent who’s probably been assigned a mission to kill us all?”

At first, the words simply washed over him, reaching his ears as nothing but another insignificant protest. Tony opened his mouth, fully prepared to continue arguing, before it really sunk in.

He’s HYDRA.

He’s HYDRA.

Peter is from HYDRA.

It felt as if the floor had suddenly dropped out from underneath him, leaving him numb and empty and paralysed. Was he breathing? He couldn’t tell if he was breathing. He probably should be, right? Breathing was normal, and good, but his lungs weren’t sucking in air like they were supposed to-

“How would you know that?” Tony forced out finally, his heart hammering steadily against his chest. “What’s your proof, Nat? Got any evidence to back up this wild accusation?”

Natasha met his gaze evenly, her features just as calm and collected as his were infuriated. “It’s called experience,” she answered coolly. “I saw him training with Sam. I saw the way he combined thousands of fighting techniques into his own unique form. The moves are impossible to ignore. It’s textbook HYDRA training for special agents.”

“*You don’t know that*,” Tony bit back, his voice rising to a shout because it was easier to be angry than afraid. “That’s guesswork, Nat! What, you want a medal for your detective skills? A pat on the back for your problem solving? *There’s no proof that the kid is HYDRA!*”

At this, Natasha’s eyes flashed dangerously, and she took a step closer to Tony, closing the gap between them.

“I have all the proof I need,” she told him quietly, her voice as cold as ice. “I grew up with HYDRA, Tony. I know what they’re like. I know what they do to you. The kid’s secretive behaviour, his stupid lies about learning how to fight off the streets, not to mention his skills in combat - there’s no denying it. Peter is from HYDRA. You can believe me or not, it’s your choice. But coming from someone who’s been there, done that, Tony? I would strongly advise that you listen to me.”

Tony stared back at Nat, his chest heaving as her icy words replayed over and over in his brain. There were still a million things he wanted to say to her, a million arguments and reasons for why Peter couldn’t be, *wasn’t*, from HYDRA, but as the seconds ticked by he slowly felt each protest die upon his lips.

A list began to form in his head, a compilation of all the disturbing details he'd accumulated over the past twenty-four hours.

Peter's strange behaviour. His inexperience at ordering food from restaurants. His apparent unawareness that things like waffles and maple syrup existed. His panic attacks. His guarded, tight-lipped form of communication, as though he was afraid to let too much information slip. His *combat skills*, for crying out loud.

And as much as he didn't want to believe it, as much as he wanted to continue believing that it was false, Tony knew that Natasha was right. She had to be. She was the only one who could know for sure.

Peter really was from HYDRA. It was the only explanation that made sense.

Tony turned away from Natasha, swallowing as he digested this. Peter - the innocent, skinny, traumatised kid he'd taken in from the streets - had been brought up by the very organisation that had been trying so desperately to kill him. If he wasn't completely paralysed with shock, Tony might have laughed at the crude irony of it all.

Peter was among the very agents that he'd saved Tony from.

The thought should be frightening, really. Tony should be disturbed and terrified and thankful that Peter had left the Tower.

Except, he wasn't any of those things.

Because it didn't make *sense*. If Peter really was here to kill them all, why had he saved Tony from those HYDRA agents? As much as he'd like to believe that he could have fought off those guys by himself, Tony wasn't a fool. He knew he wouldn't have made it out of that situation alive without Peter. Besides, wouldn't one less Avenger just make the kid's job easier?

It just didn't make sense. There was something off about the whole situation. A puzzle was forming in Tony's mind, but a piece was missing. It left a gap that restricted him from seeing the whole picture, and only Peter had the information that could fill that gap. He knew what he needed to do, if only to solve the puzzle- because if there was one thing Tony hated more than anything, it was an unsolved puzzle. He just hoped Nat would forgive him for it.

"Okay," Tony said finally, turning around to face Natasha once more. "Okay, I believe you."

At his words, surprise flooded across Natasha's face, followed by relief.

"Good," she told him. "I'm glad to see you've still got your head screwed on straight. Somehow." Tony sighed, setting his jaw in resolute determination. "I better enjoy that compliment while I can, 'cause I have a feeling you're going to withdraw it within the next few seconds."

Natasha's expression darkened instantly. "Tony," she warned. "What are you going to do?"

Tony quickly dodged this question, instead responding to it with one of his own. "What made him leave?"

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him, nonplussed. "If you mean Peter, I confronted him. I told him that I suspected he was HYDRA, and he bolted."

"*Shit*," Tony cut in abruptly, turning away from the balcony. "I knew it. Okay, well look Nat, this talk has certainly been fun, I really feel like we've created a meaningful emotional bond, you

know, we've definitely deepened our relationship-"

"Tony," Natasha interrupted, her eyes piercing, "*what are you going to do?*"

Tony was already walking away, hurrying back through the open door.

"I'm going after him."

Chapter End Notes

So that's it for the chapter, we hope you enjoyed. Just a quick little disclaimer, we love the character of Natasha and we promise we're NOT trying to make her come off as evil or unlikeable. Nat loves the Avengers and the only reason she's so cruel to Peter is because she thinks he's a threat to the people that are, essentially, her family. Don't worry, she'll soften up once she realises Peter is just as against HYDRA as she is :)

Alone (Or So He Thought)

Chapter Summary

Peter runs. Tony follows.
Will he find Peter in time?

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody, we have made a triumphant return with a nice, juicy chapter
It is - drumroll please - 10,476 words long! A stunning feat, we know.
Anyway, this will have to tide you guys over for like, a month, because exam season is coming and we're all about to drown in studying.
It will not be fun.

Anyway, enough misery - ON WITH THE STORY

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter ran.

He ran until his lungs were burning and his breath was tearing harshly in and out of his throat.

He ran until his muscles screamed and his face was flushed red from the blood that his heart was frantically pumping through his body.

He ran away from the tower, away from Natasha and her accusations, away from Mr Stark and his kind words and big hugs that swallowed him up and blocked out everything else.

He just ran.

The world blurred past him as he sprinted, pushing through crowds of people on the streets. People who were living their own lives just as vividly as he was now, maybe even feeling the same things he was. It was a strange realisation, and Peter vaguely recalled from the dictionary he'd read that that feeling had a name - *sonder*, how poetic that sounded. The elegance of the word didn't encapsulate the *fasttoofast* whirling of his thoughts or the air that was whooshing in and out of his lungs without actually letting him breathe.

It was strange to think how he'd gone from an order-following slave, to an actual person, who could feel just as truly devastated as he did now and still have the emotional intelligence to feel *sonder*, of all things. The whole notion was rather bizarre.

Peter ran, the time dragging from seconds to minutes to hours, until he physically couldn't go any further, and collapsed in the entrance of an alleyway, panting. He surveyed his surroundings, taking in the dilapidated buildings and shabbily dressed people roaming the streets. He didn't know exactly where he was, but it definitely wasn't Upper Manhattan where the Tower was located.

No one looked twice as he half-dragged himself further into the alley and away from any prying eyes. He could feel the despair clawing at his chest and tightening his airways as his hands shook - he didn't want to be near anyone when it finally rose to the surface. It would be embarrassing at the very least, but even worse, some well-meaning stranger might try to help him, and they'd ask questions that Peter wouldn't, *couldn't*, answer. The meltdown that would undoubtedly follow wouldn't end well for anyone. Help was the last thing he needed - help was the last thing he deserved.

He was better off alone. He brought danger and darkness with him wherever he went, like a curse. Natasha may not have been spot on with her accusations, but she'd been right about one thing - he *was* a threat to the Avengers. If he'd stayed at the Tower, his terrible luck and horrible past would undoubtedly ruin something for the team at some point.

Really, it's lucky she chased him off when she did, because Peter didn't think he could live with himself if something happened to one of the Avengers because of him, especially since they'd been so accommodating, even though they had no clue who he was or what he was capable of. No one had ever shown him kindness like that before. Not on the streets, and certainly not at HYDRA.

He'd allowed himself to think that maybe he'd *finally* found somewhere he could feel safe, maybe even loved, but he'd been foolish - naive. He couldn't be loved. He was a disgusting mutant, homeless scum - he was nothing. *Nothing*, when compared to the Avengers, and all the goodness and courage that they exuded with each action.

So, as he pushed himself further into the rough, brick wall of the alley and tried his best to ignore the rough brick that was stabbing into his back, Peter allowed himself to accept the fact that he was well and truly alone. No one was going to swoop in and save him from his pathetic existence, like he'd seen people do in all those books he'd read at the library. He'd just sit here in this filthy alley, filled with smashed glass, rubbish and a probable plethora of germs, watching as the world passed him by. Watching as people with lives and families sped up to walk past him, watching as he was cast the occasional pitying look amongst a sea of uncaring expressions.

He didn't need their pity - he didn't need anyone. He'd survived alone at HYDRA, he'd survived alone on the streets, so he'd be able to survive alone now. It was just hard - *so hard* - now that he'd had a taste of what could have been; having a bed to sleep in and food in his belly and people who actually gave a damn about whether he lived or died.

Sometimes he thought he deserved a home to go back to and a family to take care of him. He should've been able to make choices and for God's sake, he should know how to order a *fucking* meal at a diner with the nice guy who offered him help when he needed it. He didn't have any of that, though. And it was all because of HYDRA.

HYDRA had turned him into a monster, a barely-human piece of shit that deserves nothing good, no matter how much he longed for it. He longed for everything that HYDRA had stolen from him the second they decided to turn him into a killing machine.

They robbed him of what could have been. He didn't know his real name, or his birthday, or where he'd lived. He couldn't remember anything about his old life, or if he'd even had one. For all he knew, it could have been his *parents* who had willingly handed him over to HYDRA, knowing he'd be tortured, trained and experimented upon. Or maybe - *hopefully* - HYDRA had stolen him. He didn't think he could deal with the knowledge that his parents had seen the monster in him even from an early age, and decided that a future of pain and suffering for him was a better option than keeping him.

The thing that bothered him most though, was that he *just didn't know*. He didn't know anything

about himself or his heritage, and it was all HYDRA's fault.

When that thought sunk in, all the sorrow and pity that was drowning him slowly burnt away and in its place anger reared its ugly head. Pure and unadulterated, it coursed through his veins and made his heart pump wildly; not from terror or panic like it usually did, but from the knowledge that his life had been stolen from him. He'd been treated like an animal, an inferior being - kept in a cage and trained harshly, with awful, gruesome punishments dished out if he didn't comply. He'd been robbed of experiences and memories, friends and family and a happy, normal life, and it was just so *unfair*! What had he done to deserve that? Had he done anything at all, or was he just born to be unloved, cursed?

He stood up shakily, needing to do something - *anything* - about the uncontrollable rage filling every inch of his body and burning dangerously just beneath his skin. On an impulse, he lashed out and punched the stupid, filthy alley wall. It was there, watching impassively as the world he'd tried so hard to build up around him fell down piece by piece, along with the defences he'd constructed long ago. Now, he was just Peter - a boy with no last name and nothing to tie him to the world. If he died right now, no one would know. No one would even care.

The old brick cracked and chipped, pieces flying everywhere as the force reverberated up his wrist and through his arm. He shouldn't think like that - he was strong, strong enough to break a solid brick wall with a single punch and strong enough to survive however many more years he needed to until he could get a proper job and start his life over again.

Punching the wall was a dumb, childish way to express his anger, but it helped, if only a little, so he punched it again. And again. And again. Over and over, he smashed his knuckles into the weathered bricks, until there was rubble scattering the ground and a hole as deep and dark as the well his thoughts were falling down. Until the skin on top of his knuckles was transformed into a bleeding mess of ripped skin and he was pretty sure he'd fractured at least one hand. It didn't matter though, because his super-healing would fix it within the day, especially after the huge breakfast he'd had this morning. Although, Peter realised, most of that food had been burnt off afterwards, during his... *little jog* all the way from Manhattan to wherever he was now. Still, he'd just have to deal with it, as he'd done countless times before. Right now, he wasn't in the right state of mind to steal or beg.

With the same abruptness that the anger came, it left, and with it drained away the adrenaline and his ability to ignore the pain in his body. His muscles screamed with every movement and his hands ached something terrible, but it was nothing compared to the utter devastation and loneliness that he felt carving a hole into his chest with each breath he took.

It consumed him, and so, with nothing left to fight for, he let it take over completely. Peter slumped to the ground, cradling his hands to his chest. Tears welled up in his eyes, blurring his vision and stinging his nose, and for the first time in a long, *long* time, he just let them come.

He let them stream down his cheeks and mingle with the cold sweat on his face. He let them curve down his neck and spill into his mouth, the salty taste familiar, yet strange. He hadn't cried in so long - he'd always been told it was a sign of weakness which just could not be tolerated at HYDRA. If he cried, he was punished, especially if they were experimenting on him. Now, however, there was no one to see his weakness, and no one to punish him either. He could let it out, and so he did.

It came in long, racking sobs that shook his whole body. Small whimpers turned to quiet wails and normally, he'd cringe at the sound, but this wasn't a normal situation. He was alone.

No one was coming for him, except maybe HYDRA, but by the time they found him in this

random alleyway, he'd be long gone. Nothing more than the hollowed out husk of the boy who'd once escaped them.

Peter lay there, not moving, barely breathing, for what felt like an eternity. He watched as the sun set, its bright light painting brilliant swathes of colour across the sky; a light lavender blended into a shade of orange only associated with the best of sunsets. Even after all his time in the outside world, he still couldn't quite get used to the fact that life could kick you down one moment and then throw something as beautiful as this right at you the next.

He watched as those colours faded into darkness, speckled by the occasional pinprick of light. Oh how he wished they were stars and not just planes. He remembered a mission one time that had brought him out into the country, and the brilliance of the constellations out there, beautiful and infinite in their glow.

He felt the chill of the night air bite into his skin, as cold and uncaring as Natasha's face had been when she sent him away - away from the Tower, and away from the only kindness he'd ever known.

He stared at the dull night sky, knowing that somewhere behind the pollution and smog, there was a large moon rising to its peak, dragging stars up with it. Somewhere up there in the dark vacuum of space, planets and nebulae were spinning through the deep nothingness, nothing to tether them down or control them. Peter knew he was lying still, unmoving, but it felt like he was spinning, an out of control planet rocketing towards a collision.

Time passed and Peter lay there, unable to ponder his situation any longer. He couldn't deal with the past twenty-four hours; Natasha confronting him, losing the momentary love and support he'd been silly enough to believe he'd found. He couldn't bear to think about it -any of it- and so he didn't, instead lying on the cold ground with a piece of rubble digging into his shoulder blade, but not caring enough to shift his body. Months of sleeping on the streets had taught him that spending a night on the cold, unyielding New York concrete without any sort of shelter was most definitely not a good idea, but Peter honestly couldn't find the strength within himself to move. He didn't know if he'd be able to anyway, his limbs felt so heavy and every part of him felt drained, wrung out. He just simply didn't have anything left in him to give.

And so he stayed there, unmoving and unthinking, until he heard a strange clank. That would have generally caused him to bolt upright and get out of there as fast as the situation allowed, but he didn't care enough to even turn his head towards the noise. What more harm could anything possibly do to him? He couldn't feel anything anyway. There was a strange hiss, like the noise a cryopod made when it was opening (he'd seen many assassins come out of cryo, but few had ever returned from the missions they'd been sent out to complete). *That's weird, why would someone have a machine in this random alleyway, let alone an advanced piece of technology like a cryopod?* Peter thought.

Footsteps - familiar ones- approached him hesitantly. He knew those footsteps, but from where? Was it his handler? Had HYDRA found him sooner than he expected? Oh well, let them take him - he wouldn't be of any use to them anymore, now that he was broken. Maybe they'd get one of the new recruits to kill him for training? He'd had to do that, and the blonde woman that he had shot through the head after a moment's hesitation still made frequent appearances in his dreams. He'd had to kill another person for his hesitation, but HYDRA had left the sack on their head. He hadn't known anything about his first two victims, but he'd still been their downfall. His thought spiral was cut-off abruptly by a gasp, and the sound of a man saying his name, "Peter?"

He *knew* that voice. It was Mr Stark! Mr Stark had come to find him! He jerked out of his lying

position, ignoring the vehement protests his muscles screamed at him after moving from being in the same place for so long. Sure enough, that iconic beard and warm pair of deep brown eyes stared worriedly back at him. But what if this was a hallucination? Or, worse, what if Mr Stark had come to kill him?

Mr Stark must have seen the terror in his eyes, because he instantly opened his mouth, “Shhh, hey, it’s okay Pete. I’m not here to hurt you, I’m here to help you. I want to take you back, but only if you’re okay with that. I want you to come back,” the man soothed.

Peter stared open-mouthed at the genius-billionaire-superhero-dude, hardly daring to believe his ears. Mr Stark wanted him to... come back?

And just like that, all the hope he’d been trying so hard to quash - the hope that Mr Stark would come to get him, that the man would know the truth - came rushing back up and filled his chest with warmth.

He was suddenly aware that he was freezing, and dead tired, but still climbed his way to his feet, shaking in his spot as violent shivers made their way down his spine. Mr Stark approached hesitantly, arms wide open, both to display he wasn’t armed and to convey that he was going to hug Peter. When the boy didn’t flinch away, he wrapped his arms securely around his much-too-skinny form and breathed a sigh of relief.

After a few minutes, he let go and moved his hands to Peter’s shoulders, smiling gently. The boy returned the smile with a weak one of his own, before his eyes fluttered and he dropped like a stone.

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Tony Stark thrived under pressure.

Challenge was, one could argue, his best weapon. Tony’s best work was completed under time constraints, or controversy and scrutiny from half the globe, or when millions of lives were at risk. Where most people shied away from intense situations, he not only embraced them, but often actively sought them out. Adversity was familiar to him. A tense, high pressure environment was ideal for maximum productivity.

Yes, Tony was no stranger to pressure.

But, apparently, the same couldn’t be said for today.

“*Damn it!*” Tony roared, slamming his fist down on the desk. Standing up abruptly from his chair, he grabbed his coffee cup and, almost without thinking, downed what had to be his twelfth coffee in the space of six hours.

Nothing changed. Its effect, as had been typical of the last few coffees he’d consumed, was so small, it was practically undetectable. He figured he’d developed a temporary immunity to the beverage. Another one of his so-very-healthy lifestyle choices.

God, he was making a lot of those lately.

Running a hand through his hair, Tony surveyed the multiple computer screens before him once

more, despite being fully aware of the futility of his actions. He'd given up hope of observing anything useful around the seven o'clock mark. Yet here he was, hours later, still blindly clinging to the notion that he'd be able to, what - track down Peter? Find the kid on *security footage*, for God's sake? Tony had always been one to sneer at groundless bouts of irrational optimism (he'd learned long ago that good things weren't going to happen very often, and when they did, it wasn't due to mere *luck*) yet here he was, participating in possibly the most ludicrous game of Sit-Around-And-Hope-You-Get-Lucky known to mankind.

What was he *doing*?

Tony sighed, turned away from his computers, and began pacing around his office. To his credit, he hadn't fallen to pieces right away. At first, he'd been calm, clear-headed and determined; a little anxious, perhaps, but nothing that he hadn't been able to suppress. He'd taken his suit and spent a good few hours patrolling the streets of New York, searching keenly for a skinny boy in oversized track pants, but his efforts had been fruitless. Unable to locate Peter physically, he'd retreated to the Tower and hacked into just about every CCTV system across the city, programming FRIDAY so that she'd alert him whenever a kid matching Peter's description appeared on any one of the cameras.

And here he was. Unsuccessful, and alone, and very much Peter-less.

Tony couldn't pinpoint why he cared so much, exactly. Couldn't understand why he felt so panicked about losing a kid he'd barely known for twenty-four hours. He'd faced terrorists in Afghanistan, dangerously jealous vigilantes, superhumanly enhanced criminals, his own inventions turning rogue against him. He'd looked death in the eye more times than he could count, and yet here he was, unravelling over some CCTV footage.

*Okay. Pull yourself together.*

Tony needed to think. Properly. He couldn't remember the exact time that rational thought had melded into detached, unreasonable panic, or when coherent thoughts had transitioned into an endless cycle of anxious doubts, playing over in his mind like a broken record. The last few hours were just a mindless blur of doubt and worry. But Tony knew, from countless past experiences, that once you succumbed to panic, you were, essentially, a dead man walking.

Okay, so maybe his life wasn't in imminent danger or anything. But someone else's was. If Peter really was from HYDRA, then it was only logical to assume that the organisation would be watching him, and were probably wondering why he hadn't completed his mission yet. Tony had seen the kid fight; he knew that Peter was most likely one of HYDRA's most valuable combat assets.

Unfortunately for them, Tony fully intended to keep them from their 'prize'.

"Boss, Ms Potts is calling," came FRIDAY's clinical voice. "*Should I decline or accept the call?*"

"Decline," Tony said immediately. He was fully aware that the longer he ignored Pepper, the more incensed she would become, but he couldn't afford to lose his concentration right now.

He could feel it coming. An Idea.

*Finally. Took you long enough, genius.*

"FRIDAY, could you pull up an aerial view of New York?" Tony heard himself say.

*“Right away, boss,” said Friday. “What part of the city?”*

A flash of intuition burst through him.

“Manhattan,” Tony decided.

He’d originally spent most of his time searching Queens, assuming that Peter would return there as it was where he’d found the kid in the first place, but now Tony was sure that that was the last place he would go. He might not know Peter inside out, but he *did* know trauma, and he *did* know anxiety. (Loath as he was to admit it.) And Tony was sure, now, that Peter wouldn’t have gone to Queens.

The kid’s goal wasn’t to get somewhere in particular. It was to get *away*. A crude instinct, perhaps buried into his survival genes, or a product of his past with HYDRA. Either way, it didn’t matter. Tony knew, now, that Peter wouldn’t have a specific destination in mind. Just the desperate, overwhelming, all-consuming urge to *run*.

“Okay, come on Stark,” Tony muttered to himself. “Think.”

Rubbing the sides of his temples, he stared at the aerial view of Manhattan before him, his gaze so intense that he eventually began to feel his eyes water. Just when he was about to admit defeat on yet another short-lived idea, he saw it.

Manhattan was full to the brim with alleyways.

“Okay, FRIDAY,” Tony said aloud, addressing the AI because it was hard to come to terms with the fact that he was essentially talking to myself, “if I was a scared traumatised homeless kid who wanted to hide from the Avengers, where would I hide? Somewhere I knew well, don’t you think?”

*“Such as an alleyway, boss?”*

Tony grinned, clapping his hands together triumphantly. “You read my mind.”

It was as though a sudden fire had been sparked within him. Turning off his multiple computer screens with a quick flick of his fingers, Tony all but sprinted over to his Iron Man suits and initiated what felt like the fastest suit-up of his life.

“Okay FRIDAY, get that map of Manhattan back up,” Tony said through his helmet.

*“Sure thing, boss.”*

As the pixelated, semi-transparent image of Manhattan reappeared before his eyes, Tony turned and blasted one of his repulsors at the windows.

*Probably shouldn’t have bothered fixing it.*

He activated flight mode and took off, soaring through the newly-smashed glass panel with a fiery feeling of determination burning inside him.

He was going to find Peter.

Well, this certainly wasn't the triumphant reunion he'd pictured.

Tony knelt over the now-unconscious Peter, his heart racing as he shook the kid's shoulders, trying fruitlessly to wake him up. He should have known better than to relax as soon as he'd seen the kid. Based on his past experiences with luck, Tony knew it often lulled him into a false sense of security, made him think everything was okay, before abruptly pulling the floor out from under him. This morning had been one of those times. And now, not five seconds after embracing Peter in the most relieved hug he'd ever given out (which admittedly wasn't saying much - Tony didn't hug people. It's just not how he usually showed affection), the kid had decided to abruptly pass out on him.

"What's wrong with him, FRIDAY?" Tony demanded of his AI, still shaking Peter's shoulders gently, although he was perfectly aware that his efforts were futile.

*"It appears that Peter is experiencing a case of extreme exhaustion," FRIDAY told him mechanically. "A combination of hunger and exposure to the elements have left him on the brink of hypothermia."*

"Perfect. Just what I need," Tony muttered, gazing down at Peter's pale, too-thin face.

*"He is also quite weak," FRIDAY continued. "From my diagnostics, I can gather that he overexerted himself this morning. I assume he was partaking in strenuous activity."*

"Yeah, that'd be the training with Nat and Sam," Tony groaned, silently cursing himself once again for letting the kid back into combat so soon.

*"He has been running for quite some time also," FRIDAY said, "which has further contributed to his current condition. I recommend that you take him back to the Tower immediately."*

"Great minds think alike, FRIDAY," Tony muttered dryly, before hooking his arms under Peter's shoulders and pulling him upright. Activating his flight power, he pushed off from the ground and shot into the air, Peter hanging loosely in his arms as his head lolled back and forth.

He rocketed back to the Tower at top speed, acutely aware of Peter's deteriorating condition with each precious minute that passed. In that terrible journey back to the Tower, there were a million thoughts plaguing his brain, each one of them an accusatory reminder of something he should have done. He should have known that the kid was way too malnourished to endure one of Sam and Natasha's gruelling sessions, for one thing. No matter how good the kid was at combat, the time he'd spend homeless (the exact amount of which Tony was still unsure) had left him skinny and dangerously underfed, which was most certainly not a good thing when it came to fighting. And then to top that off with the fact that he'd apparently sprinted for hours away from the Tower-

Well, it was no wonder the kid was exhausted.

Tony finally re-entered the Tower through the smashed window, the second victim of his impatience in the past two days. There were several things he wanted to say to Natasha Romanov, he thought furiously as he landed in his workshop, but then FRIDAY's voice was in his ear, reminding him that the kid in his arms was half an hour away from hypothermia, and Tony shoved all thoughts of revenge aside.

First the Med Bay, then Nat.

Removing his helmet, Tony stepped into the elevator and re-emerged onto the floor where the Med Bay was located. As he walked down the corridor to one of the spare rooms, he quickly spoke to

FRIDAY.

“Wake Bruce up, will you? Tell him to get over here, and make it quick.”

Two minutes later, Tony had Peter carefully laid out on the white bed and was in the process of having his Iron Man suit removed. He had just sent the last piece hurtling back to his workshop when Bruce entered the room.

“Tony, what’s up? FRIDAY said you needed me-” He broke off suddenly, his eyes widening as he caught sight of Peter lying unconscious on the bed.

“You found him?” Bruce asked incredulously, stepping forwards to survey Peter properly.

“Well, obviously, Bruce,” Tony said impatiently, before wincing slightly at his harsh tone. “Look, I need your help. He doesn’t have hypothermia, but he’s pretty close to it. Got any medical advice for me, from that ultra-credible, super-trustworthy PhD of yours?”

“Um, yeah, right,” Bruce replied, running a hand through his untamed hair as he snapped into action. “First off, are you sure he hasn’t got hypothermia? The fact that he’s unconscious suggests-”

“No, apparently that’s just from exhaustion,” Tony said quickly. “Trust me, FRIDAY knows what she’s talking about. There’s a whole database of medical knowledge for her to work with,”

“Okay, right,” Bruce nodded hurriedly. “In that case, we need warm blankets and some warm saline, to get him back to a healthy temperature.”

“There’s that PhD you always go on about,” Tony nodded approvingly. “Okay, I’ll grab the blankets, you do your doctor thing back here.”

And with that, he hurried back down the corridor and into the storage room where he knew the blankets were kept. Selecting three large, fluffy ones from one of the shelves, Tony returned to Peter’s room to find Bruce hooking the kid up to an IV.

“Here we go,” he announced, and together he and Bruce laid the three blankets over Peter. It was somewhat calming to see the kid finally in a bed and covered in much-needed blankets, and when they were done Tony stepped back and breathed a sigh of relief, the tension in his shoulders unknotting as he relaxed, just a little.

“I’ve got the saline, as well as some drugs for the fatigue going in through the needle. His knuckles are also in pretty bad shape and his left wrist is pretty badly sprained, so I’ve wrapped them up,” Bruce told Tony, gesturing to Peter’s bandaged hands lying limply on top of his blankets. “Mostly, he just needs sleep, though it’s also be nice if he wakes up soon so I can give him a proper check up.”

“Hey, what did we talk about? No cynical statements, Banner,” Tony reprimanded him, his joking tone returning now that he was reassured Peter wasn’t about to die on him. (Okay, so maybe there never had been a chance of the kid *dying* as such, but Steve didn’t continuously refer to Tony as the Drama Queen of the Century for nothing.)

“Oh, right,” Bruce said, rolling his eyes. “Because you’re *never* cynical.”

“Oh wow, sarcasm now,” Tony gasped, mock incredulity colouring his features as he placed a hand on his chest. “Brucie, I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Bruce laughed a little at that, but the amusement quickly faded from his eyes to be replaced with a tight, tense look. He stared down at Peter, his lips pursed, and a light bulb suddenly went off in Tony's brain.

"You're still scared of the kid?" he realised, eyebrows raised. "Jesus Banner, are you the Hulk or not?"

"No, no, it's not that," Bruce rushed to say. "It's just - well - Tony, something doesn't add up about him."

"*Nothing* adds up about him," Tony corrected fervently. "The kid is one big, messy, bang-your-head-against-the-wall calculus equation. It's driving me nuts."

Bruce raised his eyes to meet Tony's gaze, this time ignoring Tony's attempts at humour.

"Did Nat tell you, though?" he almost whispered, brown eyes wide with apprehension. "About...you know...about..."

"The HYDRA thing?" Tony finished for him, crossing his arms as he leaned against the wall. "Yeah, she did. Told me he's dangerous, that he's been trained by HYDRA to kill us all."

"Yeah, that's what she said to the rest of the team," Bruce replied quietly. He hesitated for a moment, watching Tony carefully.

"You gonna tell me 'I told you so'?" Tony asked Bruce, keeping his tone light and careless, despite the fact that Bruce's words had his insides twisting uncomfortably. "Rub it in my face, like you said you would? Go on, Brucie, I can tell you want to."

"Tony, I don't think he's dangerous," Bruce interrupted. "Not anymore."

Tony was left speechless for a second, but only a second. He opened his mouth, a grin forming on his lips as he prepared to deliver a smart remark to what was surely Bruce's attempt at humour, before he caught sight of the look in Bruce's eyes. It was real, and genuine, and Tony suddenly knew the man wasn't kidding.

"And do you mind me asking why the sudden change of heart, big guy?" he said finally, pulling out his usual tone of fake confidence that he often resorted to in moments like this. "Didn't Nat just tell you he was HYDRA? You should be kicking the kid out by now."

"I do believe he's HYDRA," Bruce allowed, "but I don't think he's here to kill us, or anything. How could he be? You told us he *saved* you from HYDRA yesterday. If he was really against us, wouldn't he just have finished the job? Or at least, let you be killed by the agents that were already there?"

"Wow, Banner, I'm impressed," Tony grinned. "That's twice today you've actually put your PhDs to good use. So did you convince the others? That he's not here to kill us, I mean?"

"I - I'm not sure," Bruce shrugged, biting his lip. "Most of them seemed to agree with me, but Nat's still sceptical. You know she doesn't like to trust anyone until they've proven she can."

"Yeah, I know," Tony sighed, running a hand through his hair. With Peter now safely in the Med Bay, his previous vigilant anger towards the woman had evaporated, to be replaced with a reluctant weariness. As loath as he was to admit it, he understood how Natasha Romanov worked, and he knew she'd only acted because she thought Peter was threatening the team. Still, he needed to talk to her. He needed to show her that Peter wasn't as dangerous as she thought he was.

Because if there was one thing Tony was sure of about Peter, it was that he wasn't dangerous. Confusing, yes. Secretive, definitely. Traumatized, absolutely. But the kid wasn't a threat, at least not to them. If he was, he wouldn't have saved Tony that day in Queens, which had only been yesterday but felt as though it had occurred several lifetimes ago.

"Tony, there's...there's something else," Bruce went on, biting his lip again, and Tony braced himself for another bombshell. "It's not just the HYDRA thing that's confusing me. I - well, Peter left hours ago, right?"

"Yeah, around midday," Tony confirmed. "Why?"

"And he was just out in the open when you found him? No shelter or anything?"

"Nope, nada," Tony said with a shake of his head. "But that explains why he almost got hypothermia, right? The fact that I found him shivering in an alleyway?"

"No, but that's the thing," Bruce said, his voice gaining confidence as he spoke. "He *should have* hypothermia, Tony. The exhaustion, combined with the exposure, combined with the fact that it's almost December, combined with the fact that he's basically just skin and bone....any kid with his build would have succumbed to hypothermia a few hours ago. He didn't. He was close to it, that's obvious, but he didn't get it fully, and that's what's confusing me."

Tony hesitated, his stomach sinking as Bruce's words played over in his brain.

*The exhaustion...*

*The exposure...*

Bruce was right, he realised reluctantly. In fact, he was surprised he hadn't thought of it himself. Peter should have gotten hypothermia; as Bruce had said, any kid who was that skinny wouldn't survive long against the biting November air with nothing but a t-shirt and track pants. He supposed he should consider himself lucky that that hadn't happened, but Tony wasn't fooled. Things always had a way of disguising themselves as blessings, but it was never long before they were revealed to be nothing but bad news.

*Jeez, you're beginning to sound just like Rogers. Since when did you become so depressing, Stark?*

"Well - well maybe he's just used to it," Tony argued feebly, even though he knew perfectly well he was wrong. "You know. He's been homeless for so long, he's adapted to the exposure. Gotten used to it."

But Bruce was already shaking his head. "It doesn't work like that, Tony," he countered. "Sure, he might have gotten better at dealing with the cold, but that wouldn't prevent him in any way from *dying* from it. He should still be susceptible to hypothermia like anyone would be. Anyone *normal*, that is."

The cold ball in Tony's stomach twisted violently, filling him with dread as he realised what Bruce was trying to say.

"You think he's enhanced," Tony said numbly.

Bruce hesitated, his expression pained, before nodding slowly. "Tony, I know he's enhanced. Natasha saw him scale the side of the tower before he jumped off and onto a rooftop. Surveillance proved her words. The only thing we don't know is *what*, exactly, is enhanced."



Tony nodded slowly, hesitating as the gravity of Bruce's words sank in. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to feel - worry? Surprise? Relief? Terror? But no, whatever he was feeling, it wasn't any known emotion. It was something else entirely, something that he had neither the patience or emotional intelligence to identify.

He resolved to think about it later, a habit that he was adopting more and more consistently of late.

"Well, that would explain why he took out those HYDRA agents so easily," Tony said finally.

Bruce nodded. "It would, but it also leaves a lot more questions than answers. Like, where did he get his powers? Who made him enhanced?"

"Maybe HYDRA?" Tony suggested. "Like what they did with Barnes, the whole Winter Soldier thing?"

"Yeah, maybe," Bruce agreed dubiously. "But I'm thinking it's more likely that-"

His words were cut short by the sound of blankets being disturbed. Tony and Bruce both turned at the same time, their expressions similarly apprehensive, to find Peter stirring from the depths of unconsciousness.

"M'st'r Stark?" the kid mumbled, his voice slurred with fatigue.

"Yep, it's me kiddo," Tony confirmed, a second wave of relief flooding through him. Stepping away from Bruce, he moved over to Peter's bed and pulled up a chair beside him.

"Where am I?" Peter asked thickly, eyelids fluttering as he attempted to survey his surroundings.

"You're back at Avengers Tower," Tony told him. "In the Med Bay-"

But once again, it was apparent that Tony had gone and said exactly the opposite of what Peter needed to hear.

"What?" the kid rasped, eyes widening as he realised his location. "No - I can't be here - I can't-" His breathing quickened, and Tony was aware of Bruce shifting uncomfortably beside him as Peter struggled weakly to sit up.

"Tony, we gotta try and keep him calm," Bruce muttered in his ear. "He shouldn't be stressed out right now."

"Okay, calm down Pete, deep breaths bud," Tony said quickly, in what he hoped was a soothing tone. He reached out to coax Peter back onto the bed, but then thought better of it; it was hard to tell, sometimes, how the kid would respond to his touch. "You're fine here, alright? No one's going to hurt you."

"But - But Natasha said-" Peter started, his brown eyes anxious, but Tony quickly cut him off.

"Don't worry about Nat right now," he reassured Peter. "I'm gonna talk to her, okay? We'll figure this whole mess out, I promise." Awkwardly, he ran a hand through his hair, unsure if anything he was saying was helping whatsoever. God, he was hopeless at this stuff.

But thankfully, his words did seem to have somewhat of a calming effect on Peter. The kid relaxed a little, leaning back into his pillows, although his brown eyes remained slightly worried.

Tony decided to take his chance. He knew he should probably save this conversation for later, but

he couldn't hold his curiosity at bay a minute longer.

"Look, kid," he began, running a hand over his face as he struggled to figure out how to say it, "I'm not mad at you, okay? I know - I know where you're from. Nat told me."

At this, Peter's breathing began to speed up again, and he visibly tensed up. Tony kicked himself inwardly, cursing his inability to be subtle, and quickly backtracked.

"But it's okay, I don't hate you," he rushed to say. "I don't care if you're from HYDRA, I know you're not dangerous, I don't want you to leave. I want you here, in the Tower. If - if you're okay with that," he added hurriedly, attempting not to sound too forceful.

Apparently, he was more than a little rusty in the heart-to-heart department. Maybe it would be better if he let Bruce initiate the conversation? But the man was still standing beside him, his tense stance indicating that he was just as out of his depth as Tony. And at any rate, Peter probably trusted Tony a little more.

Summoning all of his courage, Tony continued, "It's okay if you don't want to, I've got all the time in the world, but I'd like it if - if you could tell me what's happening. I want to help you, you know bud, I really do, but I can't do that if you're keeping all these secrets from me."

As soon as he'd got the words out, Tony tensed up, scrutinising Peter as he waited for the usual lies to start tumbling out, or perhaps another panic attack. But to his immense surprise, Peter didn't do either.

Instead, he lifted his chin and nodded. Slowly.

"O-okay," he agreed reluctantly. "Okay. I - well, it's like Natasha said - I am, I mean, I used to be, with HYDRA." His brown eyes were filled with misery, as though the memory caused him actual pain. "They, um - they made me do...things. Bad things. But, I swear - I didn't mean to, they forced me...they wiped my memory, lied to me, and did other... things, so I'd just do whatever they told me--"

His voice was rising in pitch and desperation as he spoke, the distress clear on his face, and Tony quickly gave another clunky attempt at calming him.

"Shhhh, it's okay," he told Peter. "I know what HYDRA are like. I know it wasn't your fault."

Peter nodded miserably, but the look in his eyes told Tony that he didn't believe him at all. Tony opened his mouth, another comfort attempt on the tip of his tongue, but Bruce beat him to it.

"How'd you get away from them?" he asked, his tone soft and gentle and unaccusing. "You don't have to tell us if you don't want to, though, that's totally okay."

Huh. Maybe Tony hadn't given Bruce enough credit in the comfort department.

"I - well, one day, they sent me on a mission," Peter continued, his voice wavering, "and I - I don't know what, but...something happened, and I remembered...how it used to be, before - before HYDRA. And so I just...I ran," he confessed finally, and Tony was shocked to see actual tears brimming in the kid's eyes now. "I just ran away, and I've been living on the streets ever since--" Peter's voice cracked, and he abruptly stopped talking, all attempts of explanation deserted as his eyes glistened, overly bright. It didn't take long before the wetness in his eyes finally spilled over, and Tony reached out and took the kid's hand, all caution thrown out the window, as the silent tears ran down Peter's cheeks.

"It's okay, kid," he repeated, over and over again, because he was Tony Stark and he didn't know

what else to say. "It's okay."

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When Peter's eyes finally dried and fatigue took over him once more, Tony left the now sleeping kid in Bruce's care and took the elevator to the communal area. It was well into the early hours of the next day, and his previous sleepless night combined with the stress of the day had rendered him practically delirious with exhaustion, but there was still one more thing he had to do.

He knew she'd be awake. Nat hardly ever slept, especially in times like these. She was like him, in that way.

"I know what you're going to say, Tony," she groaned, upon opening the door to her quarters and discovering that it was Tony who'd knocked. "And I really don't want to hear it. Not right now."

"Just give me a few minutes," Tony bargained. "You owe me that."

Nat muttered a curse under her breath. "I knew you'd pull some bullshit like that on me," she lashed out suddenly, her tone furious. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry for thinking that your *precious* kid was going to kill us all, I'm sorry for trying to keep the Avengers safe, I'm sorry for trying to *do my job*, and protect us--"

"You can take it down a few notches, Romanov," Tony interrupted calmly, holding up a hand. "I'm not mad at you."

Natasha stopped abruptly, momentarily speechless at Tony's words.

"I mean, I was before," Tony quickly relented. "Really pissed, actually. You're lucky I didn't throw all of my used coffee cups at you, that's what I was planning earlier--" He quickly broke off at the dark look on Natasha's face. "--but then I ditched that, because I found Peter and honestly, there were bigger things on my mind," Tony hurriedly added. "So here we are. At two am. Forgiving each other. Happy days, am I right?"

Natasha raised a singular eyebrow at him, unimpressed.

"For the record, I don't know what I'm supposed to be forgiving you for," she said dryly. "Not throwing your coffee cups at me?"

"Okay, so that was a bad analogy," Tony admitted. "But - look, I'm just gonna cut to the chase here, 'cause you're making me feel really awkward with your non-reaction to my forgiveness of your sins - I talked to Peter, okay? About HYDRA, and everything. You were right, he did grow up there, but he ran away. He doesn't want anything to do with them anymore, he hates what they did to him. He *resisted* them, Nat."

Natasha's eyes widened, an uncharacteristic display of surprise crossing her face.

"You're telling me he left them?" she repeated incredulously. "Of his own will?"

Tony nodded. "That's what he told me. And I believe him."

Natasha stared at him for a long moment, her expression shrewd and skeptical, and Tony could tell she was weighing the truth of his words. After a moment, she relaxed against the doorframe, her features suddenly weary.

“Are you telling me that I just scared away an already-traumatised kid who’s running from HYDRA?” she groaned, sounding as though she already knew the answer.

Tony hesitated. “Not trying to kill your buzz or anything, but yeah. Basically.”

Natasha swore under her breath again, closing her eyes. There was a moment of silence, and Tony watched the guilt and self-loathing cross her face. He opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it. Better to let her come to terms with it in her own time.

Finally, she opened her eyes, and Tony was startled by the regret he saw in them.

“I am *so* sorry, Tony,” she said sincerely. “Really. I judged him without knowing his side of the story, and that was wrong. I’m sorry for that.”

“It’s okay,” Tony said lightly, and he realised that he meant it. “Like I said, you’re already forgiven. I happen to be a very tolerant person.”

“When you want to be,” Natasha muttered, but her lips twitched all the same.

Tony opened his mouth to argue with her, but abruptly closed it. “Yeah, I can’t argue with that. But listen, can you do me a favour and talk to him tomorrow? Peter, I mean? He’s kind of terrified of you right now, what with the whole *Wrath-Of-The-Black-Widow* lecture you gave him-” Natasha groaned at this, closing her eyes in obvious embarrassment, “so if you could just stop by the Med Bay tomorrow, clear the air a little?”

“I’ll try,” Natasha nodded, looking pained once more. “I have to warn you, though, I’m not the best at heart-to-hearts.”

“Yeah, well, join the club,” Tony told her.

“I would never join a club with you in it, Tony.”

“Okay, so don’t join the club. That’s good. That means you’re actually really good at heart-to-hearts.”

Natasha sighed, rolling her eyes a little. “Goodnight, Tony. I’m going to bed.”

And with that, she turned and closed the door, leaving Tony standing outside in the corridor.

“You’re forgiven, by the way,” Tony called after her, unable to help himself. “Did I mention that?”

“Go away, Tony.”

“Happily,” he called, and turned and walked down the corridor.

It was the truth. Tony wanted nothing more than to collapse in his bed and fall into a deep, restful, dreamless sleep. He all but staggered to his quarters, not even bothering to take off his clothes. He stumbled over to his bed, pulled back the covers and fell into the soft, familiar mattress.

For once, Tony slept easily that night.

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When Peter woke up it was dark, and he had no idea where he was. Panic flashed through him and anxiety coiled in the base of his stomach like a spring, but then the memories came rushing back. Natasha. Running. Alley. Mr Stark. Cold. Dark. Warm. Mr Stark again. Bruce Banner. Sleep. They appeared in flashes, running him through the events of the past day or so - he didn't actually know how long it had been since the incident in the training room.

He shouldn't think about that, though; the entire thing was just one big, awful memory that would probably trigger some kind of embarrassing panic attack. He couldn't afford to appear weak in front of Mr Stark, not anymore than he already had. The man had already dealt with two of his meltdowns and had apparently just saved him from the brink of hypothermia. *Of course* Peter had to be a hindrance to the Avengers and their resources; he couldn't just be a normal guest like any other person.

Looking around, he realised that he was completely alone, and so he took the time to survey his surroundings. There was a wide window to his right, but the blinds were drawn. He could see slivers of weak light shining through though the gaps which meant it was dawn.

There wasn't much else of interest in the room; a few paintings, a couple of squashy armchairs and the bed he was currently lying in. A glass of water was perched on the small nightstand next to his bed, and he reached for it, suddenly acutely aware of the scratchy feeling in the back of his throat. Once he'd had his fill of the cool liquid, he realised there was an odd scratchy feeling in his inner elbow. Looking down, Peter saw an IV needle inserted into his skin, held there by a piece of medical tape.

Peter didn't like needles, he'd had his fair share of them at HYDRA and none of those moments could be construed as pleasant in any way. None of his experiences with the organisation could, actually. Pushing that thought away, he moved his hands, which felt stiff underneath the stark white bandages wrapped around them. He clumsily scrabbled at the needle, trying to pull it out, before his actions were interrupted by a feminine voice. A very familiar feminine voice. One that had played over and over again in his head in the alleyway.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Bruce is very good at his doctoring thing, he knows what's best for you, so if he gave you an IV, you need the IV," Natasha said calmly. Peter jerked his head up, wincing at the sudden movement - a throbbing headache had slowly built behind his eyes since he woke up. His breath sped up, rushing in and out of his lungs and his eyes darted towards every exit.

Natasha put her hands up, either in a calming gesture or to display that she was unarmed, but Peter knew that just because someone wasn't *holding* a weapon, didn't mean they didn't have one. (One of the many things HYDRA had taught him.)

"I'm not here to hurt you in any way," Natasha said, her tone soothing and soft. "I do have a weapon though, because I physically cannot go anywhere without one - just warning you. Tony told me about... *you*, and I just want to say, I'm sorry. I know how hard it is to feel human after your whole life has been corrupted by *them*, and I made it harder for you to do that. I want you to know that you can stay here as long as you want, no one will have any qualms about it, least of all me. You can even join our assassin club if you want." A hint of a smile graced her lips at the end.

Peter didn't know what to think. He was... confused, mostly. Natasha was okay with him now? She wasn't going to kick him out of the tower? A thousand questions just like that raced through his mind, but the only one that he could physically voice was, "You have an assassin club?"

Natasha chuckled, "Yeah, it's me, Wanda, when she's here, Clint and Bucky. We kind of just sit in one of our rooms and eat cookies. If one of us is having a bad day, we can call an emergency assassins' meeting, so you're not alone. You get complete control of what we do - once Clint made

us go hang gliding,”

Peter smiled faintly. That sounded almost, sort of... nice. Having people that could at least sort of understand what he went through? He mulled it over, before a particular name that Natasha had mentioned caught his attention, and he felt his stomach drop. “Bucky? Bucky Barnes? He’s here?”

“Yep, do you know him?”

Peter was too busy having a crisis to answer her question. *James Barnes* was here? In the Tower? That wasn’t good - that wasn’t good at all. HYDRA had spent every minute reinforcing the idea that the Winter Soldier was a traitorous bastard. It was one of the many, many things from their conditioning that Peter hadn’t yet managed to leave behind.

He let out a high, keening noise as he dug his fingernails into his scalp, pulling the strands of hair on his head hard enough to cause pain. It grounded him, and he was suddenly aware of a light, flowery scent and soft, gentle hands on his back.

“Hey, Peter, you’ve got to snap out of this. I’m sorry for bringing him up, but he’s good, I swear. HYDRA is bad, remember that. HYDRA are the bad guys here.”

That was Natasha and she - she was talking about the Winter Soldier. *Traitorous scum*, that’s what HYDRA said, but - but HYDRA was bad. *Wrong*. Natasha said so, but was she trying to trick him too? Was she in league with the Winter Soldier?

“*Peter*, calm down,” she snapped. Her tone was harsh, but her eyes were soft, sorrowful. He snapped out of his thoughts, staring up at her. “He’s *good*, okay? HYDRA is not. That’s all you need to remember.”

He took a deep breath, wiping his mind clean and calming the trembling in his hands.

“That’s it, that’s good. I’m sorry for ordering you to calm down, but I know also know how this works. Orders are what you’re used too, and you’ll respond to them, even if you’re panicking,” she explained, a note of apology in her voice.

Peter just nodded - that made sense, as much as he hated to admit it. He’d been subjected to orders his entire life; it was something that had been hard-wired into his character, deeply ingrained into the way he functioned, ever since he’d first been taken by HYDRA.

“There’s no reason for you to panic though,” Natasha continued soothingly. “He isn’t even in the building right now, hasn’t been for months. He’s currently serving time in a high-security prison for enhanced beings, affectionately named the Icebox. It’s in Canada. We’re working on getting him back, though, because he doesn’t deserve any of the time he’s gotten for his crimes. They were all done while he was the Winter Soldier,” Natasha explained, tactfully ignoring Peter’s twitch at the name and continuing with her explanation. “He thinks he deserves the imprisonment though, and he got to visit us at the Tower for a week because he’d exhibited ‘good behaviour’, whatever that means. We just don’t know how long it’ll take for us to secure his freedom.”

Peter finally relaxed at that. He wasn’t here, which meant Peter couldn’t hurt him, because he surely would if they met. He’d been trained to replace the Winter Soldier, be better than him in every way. His training was harsher, more rigorous and there was no doubt he’d be able to beat the man in a fight. There was also the deep-rooted betrayal that HYDRA had forced him to harbour.

None of that mattered right now, though; he had time to get over it. The Winter Soldier wasn’t here, and hopefully he wouldn’t be for a while. It’s not like Peter wanted the man to remain

imprisoned (he wouldn't wish that upon anyone), but he didn't exactly want to meet him either.

However, instead of dwelling on these troubles any longer, he whispered a quick, "thank you," to Natasha, which earned him a small smile. He then let the exhaustion that had been slowly creeping up on him through their conversation overtake him, and soon he fell asleep to Natasha humming softly.

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A day after Mr Stark had found him in the alleyway, Peter was cleared by Bruce. Apparently a combination of rest, a whole lot of food, and his enhanced healing meant he was completely recovered within a quarter of the time it would take for a normal human to do so.

He'd moved back to his room, and then he and Tony - he was experimenting with calling Mr Stark his first name - had even chosen out some stuff for the space. He got to *choose* how he designed *his* room. This new reality where he had belongings and the ability to choose was so strange, but he strongly preferred it over both the streets and HYDRA.

However, he'd spent most of his time since he'd been released from Med Bay in his room. He was expecting it when Tony came, but that didn't make him dread it any less.

"Hey, kid. What're you up to?" the man had said after knocking softly on the door and coming in once he'd been given the okay. That was another thing he was allowed to do - choose exactly who came in and out of his room.

"Reading," Peter replied, showing him the cover of one of the books Tony had lent him. It was about advanced structural mechanics. Peter had told the billionaire about his affinity for science, and after the man had quizzed him to assess his level, he'd given him a ton of resources to research whatever he wanted.

Tony nodded in approval. "Cool. Listen, the gang wants to meet you and I - no, don't interrupt just yet. Hear me out, at least," the man paused, waiting for Peter's nod of assent before continuing. "I know you're fine just sitting up here and reading your books, but it's only fair that they get to meet you, for real, especially seeing as you're gonna be living with them for a while."

Peter sighed. He knew Tony had a point. He'd gotten a little closer to Natasha and Bruce, but he'd barely interacted with the other Avengers.

"We're having our weekly Movie Night tonight. It's a lot of fun, there'll be snacks, laughter, sarcastic commentary... all the staples of a fantastic movie-watching experience. I'm pretty sure I'll be able to wrangle Clint into letting you choose which one we watch. He might be a little salty about it, but it'll be nothing he can't get over. C'mon, Pete, it'll be fun. I promise." Tony pleaded. Peter sighed - he was doing a lot of that lately.

After a moment's hesitation, he nodded. "Yeah, alright."

"Really? Sweet!" Tony said, grinning happily.

"So when are we doing this thing?" Peter asked reluctantly. He still wasn't entirely sure he'd made the right decision, but Tony was the kind of man who was incredibly hard to say no to.

"Uh, now?" Tony suggested easily.

"Right now?"

“Yep! C’mon, they’re waiting for you.”

“Ugh, Mr Stark, you can’t just force this stuff on me!”

“Oh, so it’s back to Mr Stark now is it? I see how it is, Peter. Besides, I didn’t force you - I strongly suggested that you do it. There’s a difference.”

“Whatever, let’s get this over with,” Peter grumbled, brushing past Tony and heading into the Avengers common room.

Everyone was spread out across several couches and chairs. Thor and Steve took up the largest sofa all by themselves due to their considerable bulk; Bruce was seated on an aggressively orange armchair; Sam was plonked on a navy blue bean bag and Natasha was perched on another couch, staring at Clint with disappointment in her eyes and looking like she was questioning the life choices that had lead her to this moment. Clint himself was lying upside down on the sofa, his head dangling off the edge. The man’s face was red and his hair was standing up on end, but that didn’t seem to bother him as he attempted to lift his body up into a handstand (keyword: *attempted* - it wasn’t going well).

Tony walked right past Peter and plopped down on the last couch, patting the space next to him and looking pointedly at the boy. Once Peter had settled himself down, he announced their presence.

“Never fear, for we are here!” Tony exclaimed, startling Clint and causing him to topple over from the wobbly handstand he’d managed to pull himself into. The man hit the floor with a thump, letting out a howl of pain, much to everyone else’s amusement. His face popped up a moment later and he stuck his tongue out at Tony as he drew himself up to his full height. “Ha ha, very funny Stark. Oh, hey squirt! Nice to see ya,” he said upon noticing Peter, greeting him with a grin.

At the mention of ‘squirt’ everyone in the room turned their gazes towards Peter, making him squirm uncomfortably. He was met with a series of friendly greetings, instead of the disgusted looks and cruel words he’d been half-expecting. No matter how many times the Avengers showed him kindness, he still believed that they’d eventually turn against him. Stupid HYDRA - messing around with his brain and controlling his thoughts. Stupid, *fucking* HYDRA.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Tony clapped his hands and said, “Alright, so I said Peter could choose, which means Clint, I’m sorry, but your turn has been moved to next week.”

Everyone except the aforementioned man seemed very happy about that news. There was an indignant squawk from Clint, followed by a smack and a “Shut up, Clint. No one wants to watch *Shark Tale* for the fiftieth time except you. That film is a piece of garbage,” from Natasha.

“Excuse you! That movie is a classic and a cinematic masterpiece,” Clint argued defiantly.

A series of fervent “No, it’s not”s echoed around the room. Clint huffed and pushed himself further into the cushions of the couch, glaring at Natasha as he did so and earning himself another smack.

“Right, now that that’s been sorted out, what do you wanna watch, Peter?” Tony asked kindly, looking at the boy expectantly.

Peter hesitated - he knew what he *wanted* to watch, but what if no one else liked it? After a few more moments’ consideration, he relented and said, “*The Empire Strikes Back* ? I saw it in the cinema reruns a few months ago. It was really good.”

Judging by the chorus of happy noises that sounded at his choice, he’d managed to pick one that

nobody hated. Even Clint looked appeased.

They watched the entire movie, demolishing the snacks laid out on the coffee table, listening to Tony's comments about how he could make every single piece of technology in the movie and Natasha's remarks on how she could totally pull off some of the stunts.

It was fun, Peter had to admit. *Really* fun. He even came out with a few quick witted comments of his own, most of which had at least Clint laughing, if not the rest of them as well. By the end of the movie, Peter's eyelids were heavy and he was leaning heavily against Tony's arm.

"Alrighty, kiddo. I think It's time you went to bed," Tony chuckled, moving his arm and helping Peter stagger to his feet. The boy grumbled at this, causing the rest of the adults in the room to laugh.

Tony was almost through the doorway with Peter when Clint spoke up.

"Hey! Welcome to the family, Squirt," the older man said with a toothy grin, before shooin' him off to bed.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, that's that.

We hope you guys liked it :D

Feel free to leave a comment or kudos, we love hearing what you guys think!

Again, we're sorry there won't be any updates for a while. Believe us, if we could swap out exam season for writing this fics, we most definitely would.

Webshooters, Mario Kart and Spaghetti Slurping

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, so we're back after a veryyyy long break. We know it's been a while and we're really sorry about the wait (death to all school assessments please) but now that's all over, thankfully, so chapters should be way more frequent from now on. As a way of saying sorry we've written a nice long chapter to compensate, full of all the Avengers and Peter fluff imaginable. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Life was a fickle thing, Peter had come to experience. Nothing ever stayed the same for long, and when it did change, it was usually for the worse. In his experience at least, that was just the way life was - it kicked him while he was down and then, as if to add insult to the injury, led him into a false sense of security before shattering the fragile peace he'd managed to build.

So yeah, life wasn't just fickle, it was also a piece of shit.

That was why, for the first three days after the movie night, Peter retreated back to his room. Movie night had been amazing, and quite possibly the best evening of his life (not that he had many good evenings to measure it against), but he'd started to feel himself open up, let down his walls, and that was something he just could not afford to do. He didn't know if he could take the heartbreak that would undoubtedly come with leaving the Avengers - whether it was through his own choice, or because they didn't want to put up with him any longer, or because HYDRA managed to steal him away.

Leaving was an inevitability, though it most likely wouldn't be of his own free will. He felt indescribably happy at the tower - happier than he'd ever felt before - but it was only a matter of time before he had to go, and Peter wasn't going to have any attachments when that time came. Emotions always made things messier than they needed to be.

He supposed it was too late with Tony - no, Mr Stark, not Tony. He needed to keep things as impersonal as possible - but Peter could stop that relationship in its tracks if he tried hard enough.

Sure, it hurt him deep down in his chest, sending shockwaves of painful ice through his bones and penetrating deep into the muscle and tissue, but that was nothing compared to the loss he'd feel when he had to leave again. So he remained in his room, and tried to ignore the longing in his chest. The longing for the feeling of belonging and true contentment that the movie night had brought him.

He heard a knock on his door, which he'd kept firmly shut since the movie night, and looked up from his book on the human immune system. Peter could tell from the person's breathing alone that it was Mr Stark. The man had been showing up outside his door *at least* ten times a day. Peter had to admit, the obvious concern and care that the genius showed was enough to make him smile, no matter how hard he tried to repress it. Emotions were just added complications in his all-too-complex life. He didn't want them, he didn't need them, so why did he keep *feeling* them?

"Peter," Tony began, scratching his head in that way that he always did when he was upset. "I know I've been big on the whole 'giving you choices' shtick since you started living here, but I'm

worried about you, kid. It's not healthy for you to be shut up in your room all day. I mean, there's the obvious lack of sunlight and social interaction, but being alone with your thoughts can do just as much damage, Peter. Believe me, I would know."

Peter hesitated. Mr Stark sounded like he was three seconds away from breaking that door down himself, and then he'd be mad about having to fix it, which would lead him to the realisation that the only thing Peter could do was cause trouble and mess things up, which meant Peter would be booted out of the Tower and onto the streets. He may have been prepared to leave if that was what the Avengers wanted, but it wasn't a process he was going to try and speed up.

Another forceful knock echoed through the room, followed by Tony's voice, a little frustrated this time. "Peter!"

The teenager flinched involuntarily. He knew that no one in the building would hurt him, but years of HYDRA's conditioning had taught him that loud voices were something to be feared. So, with trepidation, he slowly opened the last remaining physical barrier between him and the source of all these goddamn *emotions*, making sure his mental walls were as strong as ever. Peter peeked through the slim crack between the door and the frame, logging Mr Stark's sigh of relief and the tray of food the man carried.

The sight of it made his stomach grumble loudly, and he realised he hadn't actually eaten anything in the past three days except the granola bar he'd found in the bathroom. That wasn't good, not at all.

the Avengers had told him he was unhealthily skinny, and his enhanced metabolism certainly didn't help matters. It had been a bitch to deal with both on the streets and at HYDRA, seeing as neither of those had really provided much opportunity to get a full three meals a day.

Ironically, though, those long months that he'd spent scavenging for food had also served to condition his body into being able to go long periods of time without food, which was probably why he hadn't passed out from hunger yet.

Mr Stark must have noticed how his gaze flickered to the tray of food because he held it out to Peter, looking hopeful, yet concerned. "Steve said that he's been leaving food outside your door, but you haven't eaten any of it. Buddy, you can't do that, especially with your metabolism."

"I know, Mr Stark," Peter mumbled, ignoring the way Tony's face fell at the name.

"Aw hell, kid. I thought we were past that," the man groaned.

The boy just shrugged as he took the tray, before retreating further into his room.

He perched on his bed, tucking into the scrambled eggs piled high on his plate. Mr Stark approached, and Peter didn't look up, even as he felt the mattress dip slightly as the man took a seat beside him.

Mr Stark took a moment before he spoke, starting off gently. "Kid, what's going on with you? We haven't seen you since movie night. I thought it was a smashing success but... did we do something wrong?"

Peter shook his head. Jesus, the Avengers were making it so hard for him to keep his distance. They cared - legitimately cared about him and his pitiful existence - and while that may not remain true for long, when they learned what a waste of space and time and attention he was, it was definitely true for now. He'd never had someone that cared for him, and he'd never had someone

to care for in return.

That thought hit him like a truck. He'd never had a person to call his own. Hell, until recently, he'd never been *hugged*. He'd never had a family.

But now he was here, in this huge-ass tower, surrounded by a bunch of incredible people who seemed completely willing to not only accept him, but welcome him into the folds of their weird, domestic life. They were already so close with each other, but they hadn't had any qualms about letting him - a scrawny, freaky teenager from the streets - into their lives. If this was his one chance, his *only chance*, to learn what it felt like to be a part of a family, then he wasn't going to fight anymore. Let the emotional pain of loss come, he'd dealt with it before and he could do it again. He might as well spend his time well while he waited for the inevitable to happen.

Peter took a deep breath, and prepared himself to get real for possibly the first time in his life. "Mr Stark - sorry, sorry, Tony," Peter corrected, at Tony's pointed look. "I - being with the Avengers kind of... caught me off guard. I wasn't expecting to have so much fun that night, and I definitely wasn't expecting to feel as... close to them as I did."

"Yeah, they have a way of doing that - breaking down your walls and worming their slimy little ways into your heart. It can be terrifying, but it's also kinda nice. Knowing that they're there for you no matter what, really."

"Yeah, I guess. I'm just not used to... *caring* about the survival of people that aren't me. It's-it's how I was trained. There's all these thoughts and feelings in my head that I've never had before and I don't know how to deal with them, and I just..." Peter trailed off. His voice had gotten progressively higher as he continued to speak, before he'd stopped altogether due to the tightening of his throat. There were warm tears building behind his eyes as shame burned red and hot on his cheeks.

What he'd told Tony wasn't a partial truth, for once. His life had been filled with partial truths and white lies. So much so, that at this point, Peter wasn't even sure what was real and what was fake, and he was sick of it. Being open went against everything he'd ever known, and it left him raw and vulnerable.

Tony seemed to get it though. "I know, kid," he whispered, before opening his arms hesitantly and slowly - *slowly* - leaning forward, enveloping Peter in one of *those* hugs. The kind that made him feel safe and secure, grounded when he was falling apart at the seams.

They stayed like that for a while, and slowly Peter started to relax, and with that relaxation came hope. He was bunking with the *Avengers*, for God's sake! Maybe, just maybe, they'd fight for him when he needed them to.

"Pete?" Tony asked, carefully breaking the warm silence that had fallen over them.

"Mmmm?"

"Is there anything from HY-" Tony cut himself off, noticing the way Peter's entire body tensed, before hastily recovering, "your, uh, previous place of inhabitation that doesn't carry, er, negative connotations?"

Peter considered that question before answering with the resolute 'no' that instantly sprang to his mind. His entire experience *there* had been hell and he had no issue recalling the darker spots in that never-ending timeline of shit, but had there ever been bright spots? After a moment of rooting through the memories of the base that had been his prison for the vast majority of his life, he found

one. It was still dim, stained by the ever present gloom that hung over him every second he spent in that place, but it didn't send shivers down his spine or needles of dread into his heart.

The entire week he'd spent refining his web shooters and the fluid that went along with them once he'd returned to the base after the disastrous mission that had brought them into existence. There had been no torture, no experiments, no training. There hadn't been any food or sleep that week either, but at least he hadn't been lying on a mercilessly cold lab table while a bunch of whitecoats poked and prodded into him without the slightest regard for his privacy or pain.

Those web shooters had been a companion on every mission since, and a damn useful tool, having saved his life too many times to count - both while he was with HYDRA and on the streets. He'd been able to freak out quite a few drunk idiots that had made the mistake of trying to bother the skinny homeless kid sitting listlessly on the curb.

After a few more moments of deliberation, Peter finally answered Tony's question. "My-my web shooters."

"Your *what* shooters?"

"My web shooters. I built them myself," Peter explained, a note of pride winding its way into his voice. "They shoot this white sticky stuff that kinda looks like spider web, hence the name. It took me a few tries but I've managed to perfect the formula and now they've got really good tensile strength, and are sticky enough to support my full weight. They dissolve naturally after a few hours too, or you can just cut through them if you want a faster way out."

"Are you telling me you were able to recreate organic spider webs, but better?" Tony asked, looking shocked. "Do you know how many people have tried and failed to do that, kid?"

Peter shrugged. "They're awesome in a fight, especially if I want to use non-lethal weapons. Didn't get handed too many of them by... *y'know*, so I made my own. They worked so well that I was allowed to keep them."

"Huh, I just knew you were a little genius, I knew it," Tony grinned, admiration clear in his voice as he looked down at Peter. "I mean, those tests I gave you told me that too, but this takes it to a whole new level. You know... I have a fully-functioning workshop a couple floors down. How do you feel about showing me the designs for these things? If you can remember them, that is," Tony teased.

"Tony, my memory is flawless, and you know that," Peter said hotly, before he glanced down sheepishly. "But, it wouldn't matter if I *had* forgotten how to build them because..." Peter trailed off as he removed his now-empty breakfast tray from his lap and lay down on his stomach, head hanging off the bed.

His brown curls flopped into his eyes and Tony said he was in need of a haircut as Peter huffed the strands out of his line of sight. After a couple of seconds of fumbling under his bed, Peter emerged with a non-descript cardboard box in his hands.

Inside were his web shooters. They were the only things that Peter had kept out of all the gear that he'd had on him after his escape, and he'd hidden them almost as soon as he got to the tower. They were his pride and joy, but also a reminder of his hellish past, and he didn't know how that made him feel. Tony's eyes widened minutely and he let out a low whistle as he gently picked them up to inspect them, after glancing at Peter for permission.

"Damn, Pete. This is some seriously complicated tech you've got here. I'm impressed - how do

they work?”

“Like this,” Peter said as he took one and attached it to his wrist, relishing in the familiar feeling of the cool vibranium against his skin as he aimed at a rather ugly vase located on his dresser (it had looked better on the website). With just a twitch of his fingers, his webs were shooting across the room, attaching securely to the vase before he tugged slightly on the web and the vase fell to the floor, smashing dramatically into hundreds of tiny shards. Tony let out a shocked huff, his eyes widening further.

“I know you hated that vase, kid, but was that really necessary? It’s gonna be a bitch to clean up.”

Peter shot the man an exasperated look before smiling tentatively, “Can we go to your workshop now? I have a ton of ideas for upgrades that I wasn’t able to test out before.”

“Sure thing, Pete. I have way too many questions about those things and not nearly enough answers.”

It was then that the boy realised what Tony had done. Somehow, the man had sensed that he was about two seconds from being chest-deep in a mental breakdown, and had distracted him with thoughts of (almost) positive things. Smiling to himself, Peter hurried to catch up to the man, who was already halfway out the door, and slipped deftly under his arm so that it settled on his shoulders. Tony shot Peter a brief, surprised glance before turning his head towards the communal area with a smile on his face.

There were only three Avengers in the room when Peter and Tony entered: Sam, Bruce and Clint. Natasha was on a short mission for SHIELD, Thor was off visiting Jane and Steve was out for a run, according to Tony, who explained the whereabouts of the missing three at Peter’s confused glance around the relatively empty room.

Sam leapt up as soon as the pair came in, grabbing a veritable mountain of tupperware containers and shoving them into Peter’s arms. “These are for you,” the man said with a kind smile before he went to sit back down again. Peter shot him a questioning look, but it was again Tony who explained the gesture. The billionaire was almost acting as his Avengers translator, making sense of all of the happenings in the Tower for him.

“Sam stress bakes, kid, and you stressed him out big-time,” Tony leaned down and whispered in Peter’s ear as the boy struggled to shift the boxes in his arms into a manageable position. “The guy’s a part-time counsellor and he was very worried about your self-imposed isolation session. Benefits? You now have a shit-ton of sweet treats to eat, and Sam’s baking is *good*.”

Bruce offered the pair a small smile. “Hello, Peter,” he murmured, before becoming re-absorbed in his StarkPad.

Clint pounced on Peter and made him promise to play Mario Kart with him later that day. “I need to make sure you’re not going to be a threat to my title as reigning champion,” the man practically begged, and Peter may have been an assassin for the large majority of his life, but he wasn’t completely compassionless, and Clint’s puppy-eyes were enough to make anyone feel bad for the man.

“If you have some secret ability to kick ass via video games, now would be the time to use it, kiddo. Clint’s been insufferable - well, *more* insufferable - ever since he set the record time on the Tokyo course,” Tony muttered mutinously under his breath. Peter just let out a small chuckle and hid his confusion because... what the hell was *Mario Kart* ?

They finally made it to Tony's workshop, and Peter spent an entire thirty minutes inspecting every aspect of the ridiculously large room. It was like a nerd's paradise, and Peter considered himself a huge nerd.

The chaos of the benches spoke of a genius mind that never stopped *thinking, innovating, creating*, and that was something that he could relate to. His mind was a constant loop of ideas that he either discarded, tried to improve upon, or filed away for later, and the half-built projects surrounding him sparked a thousand more plans that he itched to get started on.

Once Peter's kid-in-a-candy-store reflex settled down a bit, Tony led him to a workbench and deemed it was Peter's, now and forever. "It's yours, kid. Just don't touch anything that looks like it could kill you, because it probably can, and don't touch anything that looks like it couldn't kill you, because it most definitely can."

Peter shot him a horrified look, jerking his hands away from the bench they'd been resting on.

Tony chuckled. "Relax, Pete, I'm kidding. Mostly. Just remember that caution in the workplace is key. Learn it. Internalise it. Become it."

Peter nodded fervently, and then hesitantly began taking his web shooters apart, talking Tony through the process and inner mechanisms.

The man took notes on it all, and Peter felt like a college professor talking to a crowd of eager students. Even though Tony was only one person, even though the man was making himself vulnerable by admitting he wasn't the expert on this particular topic, his presence still filled up the room.

"Tony?" Peter asked, stopping his explanation of the way his web fluid solidified once it was exposed to oxygen when he noticed the man had filled at least three pages of holographic notes about the web shooters and was still writing away.

"Something wrong, kid?" the man questioned, not looking up from the scrawled mess in front of him.

"No, no, it's just - why're you writing all this down? It's not *that* important is it?"

"First off, that's dumb. This is *revolutionary*, kiddo. Second, a man named Adam Savage once told me that the only difference between science and screwing around, is writing it down, and I've taken that to heart."

Peter just smiled, nodding agreeably. *Who the fuck was Adam Savage?*

Once Peter had finished his explanation of his web shooters, Tony drifted away to work on one of his own projects. From what Peter could tell, it was something to do with nanobots, but he wasn't paying much attention to it, because the man had given him full access to all of the materials in the lab, and there were *a lot* of materials.

He soon found the disadvantage to having so many ideas, and it was that he couldn't decide which one to work on. In the end, he picked a seemingly easy formula adjustment, in order to increase the flexibility of his webs while ensuring they remained as strong as before.

Two hours later, Peter let out a frustrated huff and set the stack of notes he'd accumulated aside. Apparently, just because something seemed easy, didn't mean it actually was.

The first adjustment he'd tried to make included adding in orthophthalates, which were used in

PVA glue to make it more flexible, but that hadn't worked. Somehow, it had affected the solidifying abilities of the webs, and he was left with a puddle of oozing gloop, instead of the gel-like consistency that he had found was best for storing the stuff.

After a number of failed attempts, he decided that working his brain to the point of exhaustion wasn't his best option, so he turned to his web shooters. The mechanisms needed replacing, so Peter, being the extra person he was, decided to redesign the entire contraption - it wasn't like he had anything better to do.

Soon enough, he'd managed to disguise the web shooters as regular bands that could be worn on his wrists, and expanded into their true form when he tapped them together. Not only was it more subtle, but it also looked super cool, which was a win in Peter's books.

Perhaps the biggest change though, was their colour. He was sick of the matte black that had dominated his life at HYDRA. Now, they were a light, metallic gray - still inconspicuous, but no longer the grim shade that the evil organisation seemed to favour so much.

As he worked, Peter had listened to the sounds of the workshop, and the world beyond the walls of the tower. There was the intense thrum of Tony's music playing softly in the background. He wasn't familiar with the band (to be fair, the list of bands he *was* familiar with was a very short one), but it was still very clearly rock music, if the epic drum solos and complex guitar riffs were anything to go by. Peter had only heard a few rock songs from his time on the streets, mostly snippets drifting out of people's open car windows as they drove past, but it had been enough to familiarise him with the genre.

There was also the expected hustle and bustle of people in the lower floors going about their day - rushed footsteps, chatter, the buzz of machines in the worker's labs. Peter was pretty sure he could hear the sound of someone rattling around in the kitchen and assumed it was Steve, back from his run and now cooking up some sort of incredible meal. That man was almost as fond of food as Sam was.

Peter had just finished testing his web shooters to see if they fit his wrists when Clint burst into the workshop, startling Tony enough that the man slipped off his stool and landed on the ground with a very undignified grunt.

"Guys! Steve says that lunch is ready and that you better get your behinds into the kitchen before you starve. We are having spag bol and I *will* eat it all if you don't," the archer bellowed into the room before dashing out.

"Give a man some warning next time, jeez," Tony muttered, clearly disgruntled as he picked himself up off the floor, but Clint was already gone. "Shit, he's right though, it's lunchtime. Damn, I always lose track of time when I'm in here," the man cursed, looking alarmed as he glanced at his fancy watch.

Peter just shrugged. They'd only been in here for four hours, and that wasn't that long. He'd certainly gone longer in a workshop without a break.

"Come on, Pete. Legolas knows what he's talking about - Capsicle's homemade spaghetti and meatballs are world-renowned. We better snatch up a few servings before a certain immature bird eats it all," Tony said, hooking an arm around Peter's shoulders and leading him out of the room. The boy stiffened, before relaxing into Tony's side. At this point, his flinching was more of an annoying habit he was trying to kick, rather than a natural response to a threat.

As they walked down the hallway and into the elevator, a heavenly scent wafted up Peter's nose. It

smelled of spices and tomatoes, reminding him of the Italian place he'd passed more than a couple of times while he'd lived on the streets.

Peter couldn't get over the fact that Captain America, the guy he'd been taught was the embodiment of evil from the very beginning of his time with HYDRA, was actually a nice guy that enjoyed going on runs and cooking for his family. The same went for the rest of the team - they each had their little quirks that made them seem so much more human than HYDRA had ever portrayed them. Tony with his hugs and willingness to nerd out about science, Bruce with his books, Clint with his vents and whatever the hell Mario Kart was, Sam with his stress baking, Thor with his poparts and Jane, Steve with his cooking and Nat with her yoga (he'd been surprised to see the woman in the gym as he walked past, bending herself into a pretzel-like shape that had even Peter wincing, and he literally had super-flexibility).

Living with the Avengers wasn't conventional by any means, but Peter was cool with that. His life hadn't exactly been conventional before any of this happened, and now at least he had a (sort of) family.

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Tony relaxed back into his armchair, letting out a satisfying burp as he did so. Steve shot him a disgusted look, but he ignored it - the man had been attempting valiantly to finally put an end to his frequent belches, but Tony had so far managed to avoid the super soldier's efforts. Instead, he liked to employ the 'better-out-than-in' strategy. Then again, if there was ever a time for him to suddenly adopt good manners, it was now that he had a - what, exactly? He'd been trying to find a word that accurately described the ever-changing relationship between him and the kid for a few days now. Partners? Mentor and apprentice? *Friends*? Somehow, none of them fit quite right.

The kid in question was slouched happily on the couch next to him, fully engaged in the task of twirling his spaghetti around his fork and slurping it into his mouth. It was only moments ago that Tony had experienced what felt like a mild heart attack when he'd realised that Peter didn't know how to eat spaghetti properly. He considered it a matter of urgency, and had taught the kid immediately; it was satisfying to see the results.

"You're a natural, kiddo," Tony grinned. "Maybe even better than Sam."

"Oh, you take that back right now," Sam called from across the room, pointing a spaghetti-loaded fork at Tony. "The kid may have thrashed me during training, but when it comes to the art of pasta eating, Peter's an amateur. I've been expertly slurping spaghetti for *years* now, and he ain't gonna be stealing my title anytime soon."

"I dunno, I think he'd give you a run for your money," Tony retorted, with a casual shrug of his shoulders. "Let's do it tonight. Seven o'clock, the kid versus Mrs Wilson over there. Whoever slurps the most spaghetti in five minutes comes out on top."

"All right, you're on," Sam said immediately. "Peter, you up for this?"

Momentarily abandoning his spaghetti, Peter nodded, a hint of a grin playing on his lips. "Of course."

"My money's on the squirt," Clint supplied from where he was sprawled on the couch next to

Steve. "Should be real fun to watch."

"You wanna bet on that?" Sam challenged, raising his eyebrows in Clint's direction.

"Happily. How about twenty?"

"Twenty it is."

"I think you just lost twenty dollars," Peter spoke up, grinning teasingly at Sam.

Sam retorted by throwing a pillow at Peter's head, or attempting to, at least; Peter's well-honed reflexes proved too fast for him, and he easily ducked the toss. As the two engaged in a fully-fledged pillow fight, Tony couldn't help but feel a wave of sudden emotion flood through him, even warmer than the spaghetti he'd just all but inhaled. He couldn't quite identify why, but watching Peter and Sam fake-wrestle had him unusually... well... feely. Was that the word? Feely? It sounded weird, but it was the only way he could think to describe the sudden 'emotional teenager' state he'd apparently fallen into. Maybe it had something to do with Peter finally coming out of his shell somewhat - it was refreshing to see the kid talk to the team without Tony speaking on his behalf. A few days ago, that had seemed impossible - now it was a new reality. If Tony had known that it would only take a few hours with the kid in his workshop to bring out this new side to Peter, he would have done it sooner.

*"Boss, you have an incoming call from Pepper Potts,"* came FRIDAY's cool voice, abruptly pulling Tony out of his thoughts.

*Oh, shit.*

If he was being completely honest, he'd totally forgotten about Pepper. It didn't sound good, he knew. Forgetting that your half-coworker, half-girlfriend even existed was probably not a chivalrous move. Quite the opposite, in fact. But what could he say? He'd been distracted. Dealing with a temperamental teenage kid with super-enhancements and a mysterious past tended to do that to you, especially when you are most definitely not qualified to do so.

As he pulled his phone out of his pocket and held it to his ear, Tony stood up from the couch and hurried into the relatively-quiet kitchen, the sounds of Sam and Peter's brawl dying away as he took the call.

"Okay, don't freak out on me, I'm still alive, I'm not in any immediate danger and no, I didn't get you strawberries this time," Tony said immediately, not even bothering with a 'hello'.

"Oh, I should be so lucky," came Pepper's dry response. "Can I ask what, then, you got me this time? Not another ridiculously-oversized rabbit, I hope? Because that was hardly an improvement from the strawberries."

Tony hesitated for a second, before deciding that lying was probably not a good idea. "Apart from my undying affection and expert hugs, not a whole lot."

"Oh yes, that's right," Pepper drawled. "Your undying affection, of course. Affection that's so undying that you've been completely ignoring my calls for the past week?"

There was a beat. Tony swallowed, moving further into the kitchen so as to prevent his conversation being overheard by the entire team. "Yeah, I got nothing."

"Really? Not even an explanation?" Pepper demanded. "Because I don't know if you've noticed this, Tony, but whenever you disappear, bad things usually start to happen."

“Can’t argue with that,” Tony agreed, attempting for some light-hearted humour to defuse the situation. “Except for, oh, the time when I almost died from the electromagnet in my chest, before, I went away for three days and came back with, you know, a new element that completely solved the problem.”

“Which you conveniently forgot to tell me about,” Pepper replied coldly. “Do you see a common theme here, Tony? Because I do.”

“Apart from your hatred of my thoughtful presents, no, not really.”

“The *theme*,” Pepper continued, pointedly ignoring him, “is that you have a very unattractive habit of leaving me high and dry whenever something big is going on. So why don’t you meet me so that we can go for a walk, and you can tell me about whatever mess you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“Sure,” Tony agreed quickly, “but I gotta tell you, you’re gonna be disappointed when you find out. There wasn’t even a lawsuit involved this time-”

“The Tower lobby. Five minutes,” Pepper interrupted, and before Tony could continue she abruptly ended the call.

The silence filled the room.

Tony let out a long breath, running a hand through his hair. “Well, as far as calls with Pepper go, this one could’ve been a lot worse, wouldn’t you say FRIDAY?”

The AI only hesitated for a second. *“I would have to disagree with you there, boss. She sounded quite infuriated.”*

Tony’s sigh turned into a growl of frustration. “That’s where you’re wrong, FRIDAY. I think it went perfectly. Splendidly. As beautifully as it could have possibly-”

*“I hate to cut you off, boss, but I think you might be in a state of ill-informed denial.”*

“Thanks. Thanks for that support, FRIDAY. Really helpful. You know what? You’re going off. Time out for you.”

*“I would advise against that, boss; as you know, I am the control centre for many important protocols-”*

“Override. Power down,” Tony announced, feeling a wave of stubborn satisfaction course through him as he said the words.

*Perfect. Now you’re fighting with your own goddamn AI. You must be really losing it.*

“Just taking the necessary disciplinary action,” Tony responded defensively, ignoring the fact that he was currently progressing from arguing with his AI to himself. Not much of an improvement, if he was being completely honest. But he’d worry about his sanity later.

Re-entering the common room, Tony took a deep breath and plastered what he hoped was a believable grin across his face. “Sorry folks, but I’m gonna have to jet. Pepper wants to talk to me. Urgent stuff.” Bruce, Clint and Sam merely shrugged, but the knowing look of concern that Steve gave him told a different story. Clearly, the super soldier had overheard parts of his conversation with Pepper, if not all of it. The thought irritated him even more.

*Why does the guy have to be so damn observant?*

“You gonna be okay here, kiddo?” Tony asked, directly addressing Peter now. “Don’t mind if I ditch you for a few hours?”

“No, I think I’ll be good,” Peter told him honestly. “Sam and Bruce want to teach me how to Mario Kart anyway.”

“We’ve gotta train the kid up,” Bruce announced, “help him claim Clint’s title.”

“Which isn’t going to happen,” Clint interjected forcefully. “Squirt’s got nothing on me.”

“Maybe, but that’s exactly how I feel about my spaghetti slurping champion title,” Sam argued, “and you all seem to think he’s gonna beat me on that.”

“Well, it sounds like Pete’s got a lot of titles to take out,” Tony announced, thinking that the longer he kept Pepper waiting, the worse her temper would be. “Have fun kicking ass and taking names, kid.”

Then, giving Peter a final pat on his shoulder, Tony turned and walked purposefully over to the elevator. Hitting a couple of buttons, he waited impatiently for the elevator to reach the ground level. The doors pinged open, and he hurried out to find Pepper already waiting for him, arms folded and mouth pressed into a thin line of disapproval.

As soon as Tony reached her, she opened her mouth to speak, but he quickly cut her off. “You wanna go grab something to eat? I’ll explain everything, pinky promise, but it’ll be easier if it’s over food. Sound good?”

“What place do you suggest?” Pepper asked, raising a singular eyebrow at him.

Tony briefly considered the question, before an idea popped into his head. If he was going to be explaining Peter to Pepper, he might as well do it while enjoying some of New York’s finest burgers. “I’ll take you to that awesome diner I was telling you about. They make a killer cheeseburger, let me tell you that.”

Pepper rolled her eyes, but nodded grudgingly, and allowed Tony to pull her out of the lobby and into his Audi.

Twenty minutes later, they were seated in a secluded booth of the burger joint with two delicious-looking burgers and a bowl of crispy fries to share. Tony took a huge bite of his cheeseburger, relishing in the mouth-watering taste of juicy beef and melted cheese as he did so. Closing his eyes, he let out a small groan of delight; if he was going to be yelled at, he wanted to at least appreciate his burger for as long as possible first before dealing with the woman who was currently glaring daggers at him from across the table.

“Alright, alright, I can’t put it off any longer,” Tony announced finally, figuring he may as well just bite the bullet and get it over with. “I admit it. I’ve been ghosting you. Not cool, I know, but please trust me when I say that it wasn’t intentional.”

“Oh really?” Pepper replied evenly, her eyes skeptical and suspicious. “And what happened to cause this unintentional ghosting, Tony?”

Tony hesitated, wondering where to start. He’d never been good at explanations, and he was even more appalling at apologies. Having to do both in one day was not going to go well. Finally, he decided there was no easy way to say it.

*May as well jump right in.*

“Alright,” he began. “Well, a week ago, I was attacked by HYDRA.”

The look of cold, icy anger on Pepper’s face immediately dissipated, replaced by shocked concern. “*What?*”

“It wasn’t anything big, really,” Tony rushed to say. “Well it could have been. I mean, they were shooting at me a fair bit, and those bullets looked pretty nasty, and yeah, I guess I almost died -” Seeing the look of near-terror on Pepper’s face, he quickly abandoned his current train of speech. “But it’s all okay, I got away. Well, technically, I didn’t. This kid helped me out.”

“*Kid?*” Pepper repeated faintly, her face so pale that Tony almost thought she was going to pass out. “And what *kid* are you referring to, exactly?”

“You don’t know him,” Tony continued. “His name’s Peter. He was living on the streets before he found me. Well, actually that’s a lie, he was at HYDRA for most of his life, only lived on the streets for about half a year-”

“*HYDRA!?*” Pepper all but screeched, the paleness on her face increasing until she was as white as a ghost. “He’s with *HYDRA!*?”

*Jeez, is it even possible to screw up an explanation this badly?*

“No, not anymore!” Tony exclaimed hurriedly, rushing to fix his error. “Not anymore, I swear, Pep. He ran away from them. Hates them as much as we do, maybe even more. I think he’s pretty scared of them, to be honest.”

Pepper didn’t respond immediately, instead taking several steadying breaths as she attempted to calm herself from her Tony-induced panic. “And how do you know all this, Tony? How do you know that this kid isn’t still with HYDRA?”

Tony took his time. He ate a few fries. Took a few more bites of his cheeseburger. Swallowed both excessively.

“*Tony,*” Pepper repeated, her voice impatient and fearful all at once. “How do you know?”

*All right, time for bombshell number two.*

“Because,” Tony began, “he’s, um, he’s currently at the Tower. With me. And the team. He’s living with me and the team.”

Pepper appeared to be incapable of speech. She opened her mouth, an argument on the tip of her tongue, before closing it again. “I - Tony - are you being serious?”

“Completely.”

“So you’re telling me there’s an ex-HYDRA teenager that I’ve never met before *living with you right now*?”

Tony nodded, taking another bite of his cheeseburger. “That’s the gist of it, yep.”

Pepper closed her eyes and took another steadying breath. “And you couldn’t find five minutes of your time to tell me about this?” she asked after a moment.

“Well, it’s been a very taxing task,” Tony said defensively. “Babysitting a traumatised kid, you know, it’s not really my area of expertise.”

“Babysitting?” Pepper replied skeptically. “That’s what you’ve been doing for a whole week? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Hey, it was very labour intensive,” Tony protested. “He ran away once or twice, I had to go find him-”

“Is that once?” Pepper interrupted coolly. “Or twice? One or the other, Tony, not both.”

Tony sighed, muttering a curse under his breath. “Fine. Once. It was only once. But I had to search all of Manhattan and Queens to find him. That’s the hardest I’ve worked since I brought the giant rabbit into our house back in Malibu with just my bare hands.”

“Which was a complete waste of time, but that’s beside the point,” Pepper responded.

“You’re right,” Tony nodded, seizing an opportunity. “The real point is that I’ve taken you to this great burger joint and you haven’t even touched your fries.”

“No,” Pepper said forcefully. “The *point*, Tony, is that you’ve apparently been working day and night dealing with this - this Peter kid, and I’m going to be honest, it’s striking me as more than a little unusual. Bringing this kid back to the Tower, for a start, that was uncharacteristically altruistic of you.”

“He saved my life,” Tony explained quickly.

“But then even when he ran away, when he himself chose to leave, you went after him,” Pepper continued. “Again, very out of character.”

“It was a cold night. Kid could have been dying of hypothermia. Besides, he didn’t really choose to leave - there was a misunderstanding,” Tony could feel Pepper’s eyes on him, surveying him, but he carefully ignored her gaze. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew where this conversation was going, and he didn’t like the direction at all.

“Tony, what’s the real story here?” Pepper demanded, her skeptical tone confirming Tony’s theory.

“I just told you the story,” he replied confidently. “Did you like it? I personally thought the narrative voice could have been slightly improved-”

“Why are you spending all this time on a kid you’ve barely met?”

Tony paused, swallowing down another bite of cheeseburger. “Pep, have some fries, go on.”

Pepper stubbornly ignored him. “What’s the reason, Tony?”

“No? No fries? Not even a bite?”

“Tony-”

“Or you could try the cheeseburger, even, I personally rate it as the finest in New York-”

“*Tony*,” Pepper interrupted, and Tony shut up immediately when he caught a glimpse of the look on her face. “I need you to tell me the reason. *Now*.”

Tony opened his mouth, fully prepared to continue arguing, but Pepper’s eyes flashed in determined warning and he knew that further debate would be fruitless. When Pepper got like this, it was impossible to reason with her. And besides, a small part of him knew, deep down, that he did

owe her an explanation. At least for this.

Still, it was going to be damn hard getting the words out.

“It’s because - because - well, there are multiple reasons,” Tony began unsteadily.

Pepper folded her arms, regarding him coolly. “I have time. Explain.”

Finishing off the last of his cheeseburger, Tony swallowed and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, at first it was just curiosity. You know? I’d just seen the kid take out ten HYDRA agents in about ten seconds, so obviously I was pretty intrigued. I wanted to, you know, I wanted to find out where he learned to fight like Natasha Romanov and Steve Rogers but - dare I say it - better, so naturally I took him back to the Tower. But since then - I dunno - it’s changed.”

“Changed?” Pepper repeated quietly, her expression softening ever so slightly as she continued to watch Tony. “In what way?”

“I learned more about him,” Tony went on. “About how he’s from HYDRA, and how they brought him up his whole life - he never outright said it, but it’s obvious they abused him. He flinches at sudden movements, he gets edgy when anyone mentions the name, all the evidence is there. And he doesn’t have a family - doesn’t know them, at least.”

Tony paused, the flow of words coming to a halt, and he wondered helplessly how to continue. Dimly, he noticed that his heart was beating unusually fast, and internally corrected his earlier statement - he was perhaps even worse at emotional sentiments than he was at both explanations *and* apologies. He knew, instinctively, what he was supposed to say next, but it was like there was a massive lump in his throat, obstructing all forms of speech. Thankfully, Pepper had already worked out what he was trying to say.

“He reminded you of yourself,” she realised softly, all the anger drained out of her face now.

Tony didn’t know how to respond. He could only nod.

Pepper watched him for a few more seconds, and then very deliberately turned her attention towards her plate. With a begrudging sort of acceptance, she picked up one of the fries and popped it slowly into her mouth.

“Are you happy now?” she asked, her lips twitching ever so slightly.

A small wash of relief flooded through him, and a grin escaped onto his lips. “I’d say yes, but you left it too late. They’re probably cold.”

Pepper shrugged. “You were right, though. The flavour’s exceptional.”

“You haven’t even tried the burger yet,” Tony replied.

“I’ll add it to the list.”

Tony responded by snatching one of her fries and shoving it into his mouth. Pepper swatted at his arm playfully, and he shot her another grin.

“You’re gonna like him, by the way,” Tony told her earnestly as he chomped his way through the fry.

Pepper raised an eyebrow at him, nonplussed. “And who is it that I’m supposed to be liking?”

“The kid. Peter,” he explained casually. “I’m taking you to see him. Right after you finish that burger, in fact.”

“That’s funny,” Pepper replied coolly. “I don’t remember agreeing to anything of the sort.”

“Come on, Pep,” Tony insisted. “It’ll be fun. You’ll love him, trust me.”

“So first I’m just going to *like* him, and now it’s love? That’s a bit of a step up, Tony.”

“Please?” Tony tried, fixing her with his best puppy-dog eyes. She glared at him for a moment, before deflating under the stare.

“Fine,” Pepper allowed, letting out a long-suffering sigh. “But not straight away. You’re taking me on a walk first. Just us two. It’ll make up for the entire week you spent blatantly ignoring me.”

“Deal,” Tony nodded. “That is, as long as we’re back to the Tower by seven. There’s something I gotta see.”

“Which is...?”

Tony paused, and took the opportunity to steal another one of Pepper’s fries. “You’ll find out.”

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True to their deal, Tony and Pepper arrived back at Avengers Tower at six fifty-five pm on the dot, although their party of two had expanded to three in the time they’d been gone. Pepper had insisted that Tony meet with Rhodey, who he had to admit had received no better treatment than Pepper herself in the past week, and the three of them had spent hours discussing Peter, HYDRA, and multiple other, slightly less significant topics as they walked the streets of Manhattan.

“This kid you keep going on about, he better live up to my expectations,” Rhodey commented as they took the elevator up to the shared floor. “I don’t wanna get there and meet some scrawny toddler in diapers whose best talent is blowing spit bubbles.”

Tony stared at him in disbelief. “What, you think a three-year-old could take on ten HYDRA agents?”

“I dunno, man,” Rhodey said defensively, putting his hands in the air. “Stranger things have happened.”

As it turned out, Rhodey’s words couldn’t have been truer. Because as soon as the elevator doors opened and Tony, Rhodey and Pepper stepped into the communal area, Peter was bounding across the distance between them, his hair dishevelled and eyes brighter than Tony had ever seen them.

“I did it!” he yelled, and that was strange in itself because Tony didn’t think he had ever heard the kid raise his voice before. “I beat him! I beat Clint in Mario Kart!”

Tony glanced across the room, where Bruce, Clint and Stever were seated. Clint was doubled over on the couch, his face buried in his hands, groaning in obvious humiliation.

“Well, well, Barton, was I right, or was I right?” Tony called, not bothering to hide the gloat in his voice. Clint flipped him off, keeping his face covered with the other hand.

“Shut it, Stark,” he groaned. “I’m busy trying to regain some of my dignity.”

Tony snorted, and turned to Peter. “Congrats, kid. Knew you had it in you. This is him, by the

way,” he added, talking to Pepper and Rhodey.

“Well, this sure as hell beats blowing spit bubbles,” Rhodey muttered, before directly addressing Peter. “Hey, Peter. I’m James Rhodes, but you can call me Rhodey. I’m a friend of Tony’s.”

“Nice to meet you,” Peter said, sticking out his hand. Another surprising change, Tony noticed - the kid’s sudden apparent confidence around strangers he’d never met.

Rhodey shook it, grinning. “So, you beat Clint at Mario Kart, huh? That makes you better than all of us. You’re way cooler than Tony made you out to be.”

Peter frowned, and glared up at Tony. “What did you say about me?”

“That you wear diapers,” Tony responded, unable to help himself, but once again Peter’s lack of a proper upbringing caused his joke to backfire.

“What are diapers?” the kid asked, genuine confusion crossing his face.

“Don’t listen to him,” Pepper interjected, who looked as though she’d lost all suspicions or doubts surrounding Peter the moment he’d declared his Mario Kart champion title. “I’m Pepper Potts. Tony’s-”

“Girlfriend,” Tony supplied.

“Coworker,” Pepper finished, shooting him a glare before shaking Peter’s hand.

“Alright guys, the moment has arrived,” Sam announced, entering the communal area from the kitchen with two large oversized bowls. “Meet tonight’s entertainment - one pound of spaghetti for me and Pete to slurp. Whoever finishes first wins.”

“The bet’s still on, by the way,” Clint announced, raising his head from his hands. “If the kid can beat me at Mario Kart, then he’s gonna totally destroy you in this.”

“I don’t know about that, Clint,” Steve said. “Sam’s an expert.”

“So was Clint,” Bruce pointed out. “Look what happened to him.”

“I was publicly humiliated, that’s what happened,” Clint moaned. “Stripped of my title. Robbed of my throne. The least the squirt can do is rob Sam of his throne, too.”

“I’ll try my best,” Peter grinned, as he walked over to the other Avengers beside Tony, Pepper and Rhodey.

Tony settled into an empty sofa with Pepper and Rhodey on either side, waiting to watch the action unfold. Sam placed the two bowls of spaghetti on a collapsible table that they’d set up in the centre of the living room, and both he and Peter sat in front of their bowls.

“Someone get the camera ready,” Tony called. “We gotta document this.”

“On it,” Bruce grinned, pulling out an old-fashioned digital camera and holding it up to the scene before them.

“Alright, get ready,” Tony announced. “On your mark - get set - go!”

It was hilarious, ridiculous and intense all at once. Both Sam and Peter bent over their spaghetti bowls and began all but inhaling the long strands, both acting as if their lives depended on it. The

other Avengers were roaring with laughter, practically reduced to tears at the comical sight before them. The whole situation was so chaotic that Tony didn't even notice Clint get up from his chair and slip into the kitchen.

That was, until five seconds later, when the archer proceeded to dump an entire container of leftover spaghetti meatballs onto both Peter's and Sam's heads.

Peter yelped and Sam let out a shriek so high-pitched that Tony could have sworn a two year old girl had just entered the building. Clint joined in laughing with everyone else and Steve yelled in dismay, "Clint, you're kidding, right? That was meant for Thor when he got back!"

"The dude can go hungry for *one night*, it's fine!" Clint laughed, before grabbing a handful of the spaghetti from Peter's hair and lobbing it at Steve. Steve ducked, grabbed the spaghetti strands and threw them right back at Clint. In the space of a few seconds, the communal area erupted into a battlefield, with spaghetti and meatballs being hurled around the room at ten times the usual rate due to the superhuman nature of those that were hurling them. Tony couldn't help but join in, aiming a few well-timed shots at Steve, Clint and Sam, but his attack was soon cut short as Peter dumped the rest of his spaghetti bowl straight onto Tony's head.

"Gotcha, Tony," the kid grinned.

"Kid, you're a real pain in my ass, did I ever tell you that?" Tony replied jokingly, pulling spaghetti strands out of his hair. "Do you know how long it took me to perfect my 'do this morning? An hour. *One whole hour*, Pete, and you just ruined it all in the space of a few seconds."

"Happy to be of service," Peter grinned.

Tony pulled the rest of the spaghetti out of his hair and bundled it all together, fully prepared to throw it back at Peter with all of his might, when suddenly the elevator doors pinged open and a deep, rumbling voice reverberated around the room.

"Mortals, I'm hungry. Where are today's pathetic rations?"

Everyone in the room froze, and eight pairs of eyes turned to find a hungry-looking Thor standing by the elevator.

"Why are you all covered in worms?" Thor frowned.

"It's called spaghetti," Clint announced. "And hate to break it to you, but it's what's left of your rations, as you called them."

Thor growled, anger in his eyes, and started towards the rest of the team. "Which one of you Midgardians dared to interfere with my wretched excuse for a meal?"

"Clint," Bruce said quickly.

"But it was understandable, given the circumstances," Tony added on. "Barton had just suffered a humiliating blow. Peter beat him in Mario Kart."

Thor paused in his angry advance on the Avengers, his frustration turning to surprise, and for a moment he didn't speak. Then, his face breaking into a grin, he turned to Peter.

"Is this true, Youngling?" he asked excitedly. "Did you really take Barton's champion title?"

"Yeah, I guess I did," Peter nodded, a note of pride in his voice.

Thor let out a loud, rumbling laugh, and before Tony knew what was happening, the demigod swept Peter off his feet into one of the tightest bear hugs Tony had ever seen. At first, Tony was sure the kid was going to freak out again, but for the third time that night, he was proven utterly wrong. Peter returned the hug, laughing along with Thor, and his spaghetti-soaked hair stained the God's shirt, but Thor either didn't notice or didn't care.

"So," Pepper murmured from her place beside Tony. Miraculously, she had escaped being targeted during the food fight, and Tony resisted the urge to throw a few strands of spaghetti at her. "This is how the Earth's mightiest heroes spend their evenings, then."

Tony grinned at her. "Yep. Pretty much. Did you like him?"

"Who?"

Tony rolled his eyes and sighed. "Don't avoid the question. You liked him, right? Tell me I'm wrong."

Pepper turned her attention towards Peter, who was now busy repeatedly high-fiving and fist-bumping Thor.

"He's alright," she admitted. "And nice. And funny."

Tony grinned, a wave of satisfaction running through him as he settled his arm around her shoulders. "That's what I like to hear. It's not often that you agree with me."

And as he watched the rest of the Avengers resume their food fight, this time including Thor, and Peter laughed along with them, Tony realised that this was the first night since movie night that the kid had looked truly happy.

It was a good look, he decided.

Hopefully it would stay that way.

Chapter End Notes

Foreshadowing is at 1000%, people are left in suspense - fretting for the lives of their fave characters - and we are cackling evilly, with no remorse and no mercy to be felt in the cold, empty chasms that we claim are our hearts.

(I swear we aren't psychopaths, just very enthusiastic writers)

Old Wounds

Chapter Notes

Sup my dudes, this is a big chapter with a lot of stuff happening so buckle down and pay attention :)

Thanks to everyone who has sent us comments and kudos because that stuff makes us so happy, you have no idea!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took the team half a day of arguing to decide who was most responsible for the mess leftover from the spaghetti contest, and the second half of the day for the convicted person (Clint) to clean it. For the better part of the afternoon, he could be heard scrubbing away at the stains on the couch and sweeping spaghetti strands into the bin, muttering about selfish demigods and unjust super soldiers. Tony privately thought that the rest of the team had contributed to the mess just as much as Clint, but he wasn't about to say anything; he much preferred watching Clint labour away over the many, *many* soggy meatballs left on the carpet than having to actually participate in said labour himself. Besides, it was kind of funny, if he was being completely honest.

"I'm not talking to any of you ever again," Clint announced over dinner, having finally finished the clean-up job. "Literally ever. You will hear no words from me. Starting right now."

"Joy," Natasha muttered. "We'll see how long this lasts."

"My money's on a grand total of two seconds," Tony declared loudly. "That is, once he hears my fabulous announcement that I've got to make."

"Oh, this should be good," Sam sighed, rolling his eyes. "What's it gonna be this time, Tony? You've got us another gigantic stuffed elephant? This one's called Beryl, or some shit?"

"Oh, god no," Tony said, shuddering as he did so. "I refuse to get any of you a stuffed toy ever again after the way Barton threatened Barnaby. We still don't talk about that, by the way," he added, pointing a warning finger at Clint.

"I thought you just did," Clint pointed out.

"He's talking again," Natasha noted.

"Point is," Tony interrupted, speaking loudly so as to be heard, "I've got something very exciting planned for tomorrow. You're all gonna love it."

"Get to the point, mortal," Thor demanded impatiently.

"Sshh, big guy. The inner workings of a genius can't be rushed. Give me a drum roll, Bruce."

Bruce sighed and rolled his eyes, but reluctantly began the drum roll nonetheless.

Tony held up both hands dramatically and looked around at the team, making eye contact with each of them. "Tomorrow, we're all going to play laser tag!"

The reactions around the table were mixed. Pepper and Bruce both groaned; Sam, Steve and Nat all looked mildly interested; Clint stood up from his chair and yelled, “You’re all so dead!”. But the most comical reactions came from Peter and Thor.

“Laser what?” Peter frowned, dropping his slice of pizza in confusion.

“Let me guess, Stark,” Thor chimed in. “This is some Midgardian coming-of-age challenge? A test, of sorts? A competition designed to gage one’s worthiness?”

“Relax, Dinosaur,” Tony snorted. “It’s just a game.”

“The best game there is,” Clint corrected. “I play laser tag with my kids once a month. Smash ‘em every time.”

“I don’t get it, is that supposed to be an achievement?” Tony asked, folding his arms. “‘Cause you’re literally a combat-trained archer fighting a few six-year-olds. There’s nothing special about that, Barton.”

“Hey, you still haven’t even explained what laser tag is,” Peter complained, shooting Tony a glare.

“Right, sorry, forgot,” Tony said quickly. “Okay, for the uncultured in the room: laser tag is basically a game where you get to run around shooting people with guns that don’t actually shoot anything.”

Peter hesitated for a moment, then frowned. “What?”

Tony sighed, once again cursing Peter’s lack of a normal upbringing into oblivion. He knew it wasn’t the kid’s fault, but it really was depressing sometimes, especially in moments like these. He now considered it a matter of urgency to make sure Peter played at least one game of laser tag in his youth.

“Basically, kid, it’s a game-”

“Tony, shut it already,” Rhodey interrupted. “You’re about as good at explaining things as you are at getting up on time in the mornings. Look, Peter, it pretty much works like this: you go into this room with a few obstacles scattered around, and you’re each wearing a vest that has a fake gun attached. The gun shoots out a harmless red light called a laser, and the aim of the game is to shoot that laser onto as many other people’s vests as possible.”

“And it’s the most *pointless game* in the history of games,” Bruce groaned, burying his head in his hands. “Do we really have to play this, Tony? There are so many more worthwhile ways I could be spending my time.”

“Banner’s just scared because he knows he’s gonna lose,” Clint announced, smirking at Bruce. “How do you plan on winning without your Hulk buddy to help out? Let’s face it, those fifty PhDs of yours are going to mean nothing when you come up against me.”

“For all we know, Bruce could Hulk out while he’s playing,” Steve pointed out.

“Which is another reason why I refuse to do this,” Bruce nodded. “I’d rather not have to pay the million-dollar bill for the laser place once the Hulk’s smashed it to pieces.”

“Come on, Bruce,” Tony pleaded, fixing Bruce with what he hoped was a guilt-evoking stare. “It’ll be fun, trust me. Please?”

“You can team up with me, if you want,” Pepper volunteered reluctantly. “I can’t say I’m a big fan

of the sport, either, so we can just suck together.”

“There you go, Bruce,” Tony said. “A fellow killjoy to hang out with. Sound good?”

Bruce sighed, and rolled his eyes. “No, not really, but I guess I don’t have a choice.”

“That’s the spirit,” Tony grinned, clapping him on the back.

“Tony, I don’t know about this,” Steve interjected suddenly. “It’s not that I’m trying to be a party pooper-”

“Really, Steve?” Tony cut in. “‘Cause sometimes I feel like that’s all you ever do.”

“-but the *point is*,” Steve ploughed on, determinedly ignoring Tony, “Nat, Sam and I are meeting up with Wanda on Thursday, to catch Brock Rumlow once and for all.”

“Rumlow?” Tony responded, frowning. “As in, the HYDRA mole who used to be part of SHIELD? What’s he up to now, and why don’t I know about it?”

“He’s trying to steal a biological chemical weapon from the Institute for Infectious Diseases in Nigeria,” Natasha supplied immediately. “And you’d probably know about this if you actually showed up to Steve’s assigned report meetings, instead of bailing and spending that time buying a few extra sports cars.”

“Hey, that only happened once,” Tony protested. “Anyway, this Rumlow case sounds pretty intense. If you ask me, it’s all the more reason for you guys to come tomorrow. What better way to clear your mind before a mission than happily offering yourselves up as victims for Tony Stark’s laser-conquest tomorrow? In which I defeat all of you?”

“Not gonna happen, Stark,” Clint spoke up. “It’s *you* who’s going to become victim to Clint Barton’s laser-conquest, not the other way around.”

“Competition,” Tony said, nodding in mock approval. “I like it. It’ll make the final victory taste so much sweeter.”

“Well, personally, I’m in for this,” Natasha said, shooting a look at Steve. “I know we’ve got the Rumlow case, but that’s still two days away. And I’m really sorry, Steve, but someone has to knock Clint and Tony off their high horses.”

“Agreed,” Sam nodded. “The most satisfying moment of my life was when Peter beat Clint at Mario Kart, but if someone beats him tomorrow as well, it’ll come as a close second.”

“Ah, you guys all talk the talk, but when it comes to walking the walk, you’re gonna be tripping over your own feet,” Clint warned them, finishing off the last of his pizza.

“You wanna bet on that?” Sam challenged.

Clint gave him a look. “Wilson, the last time you made a bet with me, you chickened out.”

“How could I chicken out when I didn’t even get to finish the contest?” Sam protested. “You’re the one who almost drowned me with spaghetti, remember?”

Thinking that this conversation could drag on all night if he didn’t intervene, Tony clapped his hands loudly. “Alright, cool it guys. We get it - you’re both just a bunch of petty deal-breakers. Anyway, Steve, you in?”

Steve gave it a moment's consideration, and Tony was positive that he was going to argue and make things difficult, as he had a fond habit of doing. It was to his great surprise, then, that Steve nodded slowly.

"Alright, you got me," he conceded, letting out a breath. "I guess there's no harm in some healthy competition before the mission. Anyway, I've heard laser tag is one of the key cultural experiences of the twenty-first century, so it's probably about time I tried it first-hand."

"That's what I like to hear, old man," Tony replied, feeling a thrill of satisfaction jolt through his body at Steve's agreement. "Thor, big guy? How about you?"

Thor grinned. "Certainly I shall give this Midgardian contest a try, although I have to warn all you mortals, you're about to come face to face with the God of Thunder in all his might and glory."

"I reckon I can handle that," Clint shot back, a competitive glint in his eye. "You're going down, god-man."

And as the rest of the Avengers began to place their bets on who would win the laser tag, Tony leaned back and allowed himself to have a moment of self-admiration.

God, he loved his ideas sometimes.

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After dinner, Tony was about to call it a night and head to his private quarters when he had a sudden compulsion to go speak to Peter. He'd long since learned that whenever he experienced these streaks of spontaneity, it was best to just run with them, otherwise he would spend the rest of the day feeling edgy and restless.

"Knock, knock," Tony called, rapping his knuckles on Peter's door. "Guess who."

"Tony?" came the kid's reply, and a few seconds later the door opened to reveal a tired-looking Peter, dressed in the pyjamas Tony had lent him.

"That's me," Tony replied. "Whoops, you look pretty beat, did I wake you up?"

"No, I was just about to go to bed," Peter said, yawning. "What's up?"

"A lot of things are up," Tony answered, closing the door behind him as he followed Peter into his room. "The sky, the sun, the stars, the clouds...you excited for tomorrow, by the way?"

Peter shrugged, moving over to his bed and perching himself on the edge. "You mean the laser tag thing?"

Tony nodded and collapsed into the chair opposite Peter's bed. "Yup."

"I - I dunno," Peter shrugged again. "I mean, it sounds fun and all but - y'know - I've never played before. I don't think I'll be very good."

"Who cares?" Tony replied easily. "Thor and Steve have never played before either, it's not like you're on your own."

"Yeah, but they're - they're *Thor and Steve*," Peter protested weakly. "A literal god and Captain America."

Tony nodded. “Yeah, and you’re *Peter*,” he responded, mimicking Peter’s tone. “The kid who saved my life from ten HYDRA agents.”

Peter glanced up at Tony, a surprised look in his eyes. “It wasn’t like that. You could’ve taken them out yourself, right?”

Tony shook his head. “Not without my suit, no. I never thanked you, by the way.”

“Thanked me?” Peter repeated, frowning. “For what?”

“The HYDRA thing,” Tony answered, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world (which, to him, it was). “Kicking their asses. Saving my life. It was a pretty ballsy move, I gotta say, and Pepper would’ve been pretty pissed off if I let myself get killed, so...thanks. You did good, kid.”

Peter shrugged, looking slightly bashful now. “I dunno. Just trying to do the right thing, I guess.”

“Well, I think it’s pretty impressive,” Tony admitted. “And I also think that if you can take on ten HYDRA agents like that, laser tag tomorrow should be a piece of cake for you.”

“You think so?” Peter asked, glancing up at Tony with those chocolate brown eyes. Sometimes, Tony wondered what was going on behind those eyes, what inner thoughts plagued the mechanisms of Peter’s mind. Maybe it was just Tony being inept at anything feelings-related, but it was hard to tell what the kid was thinking most of the time. Peter seemed fine, usually, but Tony couldn’t shake the feeling - hadn’t been able to since he’d first met the kid - that there was a lot more underneath that exterior of *fine*-ness. More than once, Tony had been tempted to ask Peter himself, his damned curious nature compelling him to go prying into the kid’s mind, and ask all kinds of questions. Now was one of those occasions.

*Not now, Stark. Let the kid have his secrets.*

“Yep,” Tony said instead, dragging himself back to the present. “You’ll do great. Fantastic. Superb. Oh, and in exchange for all this praise I’m giving you, can I ask a favour?”

Peter shrugged, looking curious. “Sure. What is it?”

Tony flashed him a grin. “Please, please, *please* beat the crap out of Rogers tomorrow.”

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Tomorrow dawned bright and early, and much faster than usual. Probably something to do with Tony actually sleeping through the night (a rare feat) rather than simply working away at his suits until either a cranky Pepper dragged him to bed, or the sun poked through the large windows, signifying the dawning of another day.

“Hi, FRIDAY,” he said the next morning, addressing his AI as he entered the workshop. “I’m back. And yes, I’ve turned you back on. Time out is over.”

“*I am...flattered, boss,*” came FRIDAY’s somewhat dry response. “*Is there anything in particular you need?*”

“Yes,” Tony replied. “Book me an exclusive laser tag session, at that place down in Queens. The good one. Tell them I’m bringing nine other people with me, and make sure no one else can get access to the place while we’re there. Bribe them with a couple hundred if you have to.”

“*Right away, boss,*” FRIDAY responded. “*What time would you like this session booked for?*”

“Let’s say eleven am,” Tony decided. “I’ll probably have to drag Clint’s ass out of bed to get there on time, but oh well.”

His prediction turned out to be correct. Clint, while undoubtedly a valuable asset to the team, was not an easy person to live with. He had a habit of periodically turning into a hormonal teenager who would stubbornly refuse to leave the safety of his bed before midday, and today happened to be one of those days. It took the joint efforts of Tony, Rhodey and Bruce to finally convince the man to exit his quarters, and they only succeeded because of the promise of the upcoming game of laser tag and Sam’s waffles.

The team sat down for breakfast about an hour before they were due at laser tag, feasting on coffee and waffles and strawberries. Several more gambles were tossed around; Nat and Clint both bet fifty dollars that they would beat the other, and Thor made Sam promise to cook him one hundred pancakes on a day of his choice if he scored higher points than him. As for Tony, he couldn’t resist striking up a bet with Steve (probably not a good idea, considering the man’s enhanced abilities, but Tony never could shy away from a challenge).

“If I beat you,” he proposed, “you take all my dishwashing shifts for the next month. And you buy me cheeseburgers at my request. For another month.”

“You’re on,” Steve said with a grin. “But, if I win, I get to set that stuffed elephant you gave Clint on fire, and watch your face while it burns.”

Tony’s mouth dropped open in horror. “Rogers, you can’t come for Barnaby like that.”

But Steve just shrugged, in that annoyingly smug way he always did. “That’s my terms, Tony.”

And so, it was with a resentful scowl plastered across his face that Tony agreed to what was possibly the riskiest bet of his life - which was saying something, considering the amount of ridiculous gambles he’d made in his party-boy youth. He silently vowed to make sure, with whatever means necessary, that he scored more points than Steve. He would sink to cheating if he had to.

The team arrived at laser tag a few minutes after eleven. Tony considered it a matter of pride that he always arrived fashionably late to any occasion, so he was pleased to swagger up to the counter at 11:05 and request for their session to begin. The cashier, a young woman in her late twenties, could barely form coherent sentences; she stared at the eight Avengers plus Pepper and Tony with star-struck eyes as she gave them their wristbands and directed them through to the set-up room.

“*Welcome to Queens Laser Planet,*” said a grainy image of a man dressed in a futuristic space get-up as Tony and the others entered the set-up room. “*Please take a seat and listen to these instructions.*”

The team obliged, shuffling over to the hard wooden benches against the opposite wall.

“Do we really have to listen to the briefing?” Clint moaned. “Let’s get started already.”

“Not all of us are laser tag nerds, Clint,” Natasha reminded him, nodding her head at Thor, who was watching the pixellated TV-screen with an expression of confused interest on his face.

Tony took a seat next to Peter, giving him a playful nudge as they sat. “Get ready to be educated in the world of fun and games, kid.”

“What, even more fun than Mario Kart?” Peter asked, staring up at him with amazed eyes.

Tony shook his head, tutting disappointedly as he did so. “Sometimes I forget how sad your definition of fun is.” He wondered, for a brief second, whether the joke was a touchy subject, but Peter just laughed.

The man on the screen proceeded to inform them on the basics of laser tag, including how to hold, shoot and load their laser guns. The definition and sound quality of the video was so poor that Tony was close to ripping his hair out with his bare fingers after a few minutes, but thankfully he was saved from the act by the end of the video.

“Alright people, let’s get this started,” he announced, and they all filed through the next door, labelled ‘Weapons Room’.

Inside were racks donned with the laser packs that they were supposed to wear. Tony quickly figured out how to change the settings on the packs from ‘team’ to ‘solo’, and everyone shouldered theirs on. With the exception of Pepper and Bruce, who were more than happy to work together, the rest of the team was playing free-for-all.

“And Barton is ready to destroy,” Clint declared, once he’d secured his pack. “You are all going down harder than you’ve ever gone down before.”

“Don’t get cocky,” Rhodey reminded him. “That’s usually what happens right before you fail epically.”

“Not today, War Machine,” Clint told him confidently. “You’re toast, I’m telling you.

“Hey, ladies, less talking and more shooting,” Tony interrupted. “I wanna beat Rogers already.”

Steve shot him a competitive glare. “Not gonna happen, Stark.”

“Alright, can we just get this over with?” Bruce pleaded, looking impatient. “I really don’t want to be here any longer than necessary.”

“Wrong attitude, Banner,” Clint said, giving Bruce a friendly punch on the shoulder. “Now, it’s time for me to smash you all.”

Rolling his eyes at Clint’s statements, Tony filed through the doorway behind the other Avengers, leading into the arena. The place was dark, lit only by sparsely placed neon lights that flashed dramatically, changing angles every few seconds to amplify the already-chaotic environment. The arena had been designed as a replica of a dumpsite, with abandoned cars, piles of boxes and stray litter discarded everywhere. There was a large open space in the centre, which was surrounded by a complicated array of corridors, stairs and tunnels, the vast majority of which Tony recalled from the last time he’d played here. Good. He had the navigational advantage.

Tony was just about to activate the button that would start gameplay when he realised that something - no, some *one* - was missing.

Peter.

Carefully, he scanned the throng of Avengers up ahead for any sign of the kid, but came up empty. Evidently, Peter hadn’t even entered the arena. Silently ducking back through the doorway, he re-emerged into the weapons room to see the kid standing stock-still with his back to Tony, apparently rooted to the spot in front of one of the laser packs. He wasn’t wearing one, hadn’t even so much as picked up a gun.

Confusion overtaking rationale, Tony approached Peter and thoughtlessly reached out to grab his shoulder. “Hey, kid, what’s-”

But before he could finish, Peter jumped so high into the air that Tony could have sworn he almost touched the roof. Immediately, he withdrew the hand as Peter whipped around to face him, face pale and eyes darting around the room. It took a moment before the eyes focused on Tony.

“Whoa, kid, you good?” Tony asked carefully, taking a cautious step backwards. “Looked like you were trying to set a world record for high jump there.”

Peter swallowed. He seemed weary, and distinctly shaken, but certainly not in full-out panic mode, which was something at least.

“Yeah, I’m good, I’m fine, I’m-” The reassurances caught in his throat, and he abruptly stopped talking. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he avoided Tony’s eyes. “Um.”

Peter was apparently at a complete loss for words. His whole stance screamed *uncomfortable*, from the rigid way he was holding himself to his eyes, which continued to dart hastily around the room, unable to focus on one particular point. Glancing once more at the rack lined with laser guns behind him, Tony made a sudden connection.

“You sure you’re up for this, kid?” he asked dubiously. “If it’s, uh, setting you off or something, that’s cool, we can ditch the others. You don’t have to play-”

But Peter was already cutting him off, shaking his head adamantly. “No, it’s okay, Mr - Tony. Thanks, really, but I’ll be fine. It’s, well - I mean, like you said, fun and games right?”

Tony stared at Peter, giving him one long appraising look. The smile on the kid’s face looked rather forced, and Tony was fairly certain that any responsible adult would be insisting by now that Peter sat out from the game. But the hard set of the kid’s jaw indicated his determination, and somehow, Tony couldn’t find it within himself to deprive the kid from such a necessary cultural experience.

Stop kidding yourself. There’s no way you should be letting him play.

For better or worse, Tony ignored the voice, as he so often did. He also ignored the fact that ignorance of said voice was usually the first step to something not so good occurring.

“Alright kid, if you’re sure,” he grinned. “But you’re gonna need one of these.”

Turning to the rack of laser packs, Tony selected one that was glowing red and handed it to Peter, winking as he did so.

“It’s called *Cosmic Exterminator*,” he told Peter jokingly. “Fitting name for someone who’s defeated Clint at Mario Kart, I think.”

Peter managed a small grin and accepted the vest, lifting it onto his shoulders with only a small hesitation. Once the kid had activated his gun, Tony led him out of the weapons room and into the arena.

“You ready for this?” he asked Peter, who nodded vigorously.

“Okay people, are we all here?” Tony called, addressing the rest of the team. “All good to start?”

He barely got the words out before there was a sudden zapping noise from across the arena, in the direction of the corridor maze. Startling, Tony looked down and saw his laser pack flash once

before a collision sound effect was emitted. He'd been hit.

"Would you look at that," called Sam from across the arena. "Five seconds in, and I've already disabled Tony."

"Dammit," Tony muttered to himself. Apparently, the game had already started.

More shooting sound effects came from his left, and Tony quickly nudged Peter's elbow. "Well, looks like the game's already started, kid. You might wanna consider running for it before I blast you just like Wilson blasted me."

And then, giving Peter a final friendly wink, he took off in the opposite direction, heading for the maze of corridors.

Tony's plan was simple. Employ the tried and true strategy, the one that he'd worked with before. Last time he'd been here, years ago though it admittedly was, he'd remained hidden in the maze for the majority of the time, waiting to ambush those who wandered around corners and were caught off guard. He'd found the perfect hole in the wall to snipe people across the arena, as well. The strategy had worked in his favour, and he'd won the game several times. Although, if he recalled correctly, he *had* been playing against a bunch of thirteen-year-olds who had won one of Tony's old *Invite Iron Man* vouchers. He used to sell them in magazines, lottery-style, and people who won had the privilege of choosing a venue to spend a day with him. Those boys, as it turned out, had gone for laser tag.

But that was besides the point. If the strategy had worked on teenagers with years of experience via the Xbox controller, it was certainly going to work on a hundred-year-old man whose only experience when it came to aiming things was with a physics-defying vibranium shield and a few guns from 1945. He would have Steve down in five seconds flat.

The problem was, Tony hadn't counted on running into Natasha.

"*Argh!*" he yelled as he rounded a corner, only to find Natasha lying in wait on the opposite wall. "Damn you, Romanov, you're stealing my strat!"

He aimed a shot at her but missed tremendously, and ducked back behind the wall.

"Please don't tell me," Natasha called from her position on the other side of the wall, "that you just said *strat*, Tony?"

"Yeah, it didn't really work as planned," Tony admitted. "I heard some kids using it the other day. Pretty sure I took it out of context."

"Or maybe you're not qualified to use it?" Natasha suggested, and a second later she had jumped out from behind the wall and shot Tony right in the chest. "Just like you aren't qualified to play this game, apparently."

Tony rolled his eyes at her, concealing his self-directed frustration with indifference. "Cool it, Nat, not all of us are trained assassins. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm off to take down Rogers."

"Not at all," Natasha said to him, smirking. "I've got a similar goal, but with a much more challenging opponent. Clint needs to be dethroned."

And with that, she sprinted past him, reloading her gun as she did so.

Inwardly cursing the fact that he just got beaten by Natasha, Tony moved forwards and found a

stairwell that he remembered. He took the flight of stairs two at a time and came to a stop in a small nook concealed by several piles of heavy boxes. From here, he had a perfect vantage point of the action happening in the open parts of the arena, as well as the chance to ambush anyone who decided to come snooping.

It didn't take long before Tony successfully shot Pepper. Not once, but three times in succession, all because she remained rooted to the same spot in the centre of the room, turning around as she searched for her invisible attacker. It was with great satisfaction that he then took down Bruce, who ran out to drag her back undercover. Following Bruce came Rhodey, Sam, and Thor, the last of whom had apparently no idea of the concept of stealth. The demigod instead had adopted the strategy of climbing on top of one of the abandoned cars in the centre of the arena, and was fending off anyone who came near him. It worked reasonably well, until of course someone like Tony finished him off from a distance.

But he still hadn't taken down his one true opponent. Steve, Clint and Natasha were nowhere to be seen, which meant that all three of them were probably battling it out in the maze somewhere. Shuffling past his cover of boxes, Tony crept along the corridor and took a left, gun raised in anticipation. He could hear shots going off ahead and moved towards them, fully prepared to take down Captain America in a blaze of smug *I-told-you-so* glory-

And abruptly tripped over something very solid.

"Ouch!" Tony yelped as he fell, his torso landing painfully on the hard, unyielding plastic of his laser gun. "Looks like they've upgraded the obstacle factor since I last played-"

But as he sat up, it dawned on Tony that he hadn't tripped over an obstacle.

He had tripped over *Peter*.

The kid was sitting on the floor, slightly out of the way of the main corridor, his head buried in his arms. For a moment, Tony thought with disbelief that Peter had somehow fallen asleep during the middle of the game. But then, rationale kicked in, and he realised that something was very clearly wrong.

"Uh, kid? You good down there?" Tentatively, Tony crouched in front of Peter and placed a hand on one of his arms.

Peter's head snapped up, his eyes wildly alert, and it took all of two seconds for Tony to put the pieces together. Hyperventilating, shaking of limbs, that unfocused look in his eye - Peter was having a panic attack.

"Peter. Peter, listen to me. Breathe," Tony instructed, keeping his voice calm underneath the raging torrent of his thoughts.

How could you be so stupid? Why did you let him play? Jesus, Stark, you're becoming less of a genius by the second.

"Deep breaths, just like that," Tony continued, as Peter shakily inhaled and exhaled. "It's alright, trust me. Just keep breathing."

It took at least a minute, but after a few more soothing words Peter seemed to be in control of himself once more. Tony briefly deliberated asking Peter what was wrong, but he didn't think the kid would know how to answer. Plus, the situation was pretty self-explanatory.

Tony had brought Peter to laser tag. A game that relied exclusively on realistically replicating

gunfire and shooting other people. Two things that most definitely reminded Peter of HYDRA.

God, he was such an idiot.

“You good?” Tony asked, even though Peter clearly wasn’t, because he couldn’t think of any other way to express his concern.

“I - um - no, not really,” Peter admitted, letting out a shaky breath. “I, um, I kind of lied before. I - this whole thing - it’s not really okay.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I kind of gathered that. Look, Pete, there’s nothing forcing you to play.”

“No, but that’s the thing,” Peter blurted out. “I want to. I really do want to play, but it’s just - the guns, the noises...it just...freaks me out. I know it sounds stupid.” He looked away from Tony, staring down at his knees.

“Nope, not true,” Tony said firmly. “You know, you’re a smart kid, but right now you’re very much incorrect. It doesn’t sound stupid to me. Sounds very reasonable, actually. This is just something that triggers you. Considering your past, it’s perfectly normal.”

Peter hesitated, glancing back up at Tony. “It’s...I dunno....I think it’s kind of pathetic.”

“Hey, kid, what did we talk about?” Tony reprimanded him, although not unkindly. “You were brought up by HYDRA, it’s only natural that this kind of stuff is gonna freak you out. Trust me, I would know, I used to deal with these sorts of things too - still do, occasionally. I know that all it takes is a single word to set you off. There’s nothing wrong with you, trust me kid. You’re actually doing better than most.”

At this, something brightened in Peter’s eyes. “You really think so?”

Tony nodded firmly. “I really do. Now, what do you say we bail on this crew and go and grab some pizza?”

“But you’ve got your bet with Steve,” Peter pointed out. “Don’t you want to beat him?”

“It can wait,” Tony shrugged. “There’s always gonna be an opportunity to one-up Captain America, kid, let me tell you. I’ll find something else to satisfy my thirst for victory.”

Peter hesitated. He bit his lip, cast his eyes down at his knees, raised them again, and repeated this several times in a conflicted manner. Finally, he announced, “No, it’s okay.”

For a second, Tony didn’t think he’d heard right. “What?”

“We don’t have to leave,” Peter repeated firmly. “It’s okay.”

Tony raised an eyebrow dubiously. “Kid, not trying to be a buzzkill here, but last time you said that you ended up in a ball on the floor, having a silent freak-out. This place is clearly messing with you, I think it’d be better if we just left-”

“Yeah,” Peter said quietly, “but then it won’t get any better, will it?”

Tony paused as understanding filled him. Peter wasn’t just trying to be noble; he genuinely wanted to overcome his fear.

“I want to stay,” he continued steadily. “I might - I mean - it might take some getting used to, but I think I should stay. I think, you know, it’ll help me get over - this.” He gestured helplessly at

himself.

Tony ran a hand through his hair, torn between options. On the one hand, he'd already failed at reading the warning signs once, and letting Peter continue to play for a second time was almost like tempting fate. But on the other hand, it wasn't like he controlled the kid; Peter could do whatever he wanted, technically, so long as it didn't harm others, and who was Tony to stop the kid from facing his demons?

"Okay," he agreed finally. "Okey dokey. You can stay. But on one condition - as soon as you feel even a hint of a freak out coming on, you gotta let me know, alright? I don't care if you're busy taking down Clint, or whatever, you come get me and we'll sort it out. Got it?"

Peter nodded, his eyes twinkling ever so slightly now. "Okay. But how will I know where to find you?"

"Just look for the guy slaying everyone around him, and that'll be me," Tony said, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

For a moment, Peter didn't speak, his lips quirking ever so slightly. "Okay. That's cool, Tony. But just for the record, I don't think you'll be slaying *everyone*."

And then, before Tony could even react, the kid raised his gun and shot it right in Tony's chest.

Tony fell backwards in surprise, once more hearing the familiar collision sound effect from his laser pack. "Damn you, kid," he groaned. "I was on a winning streak, you know that? Hadn't been hit in over five minutes."

Peter grinned at him. "Yeah. Sorry about that." And with that, he jumped to his feet and sprinted off down the corridor, yelling "Catch me if you can!" as he went.

~~~

Laser tag was shit.

The too-bright lights flashed overhead, seeming to penetrate Peter's eyes no matter how tightly he closed them, no matter how deeply he burrowed his head into his arms. They left their obscene imprints burning on his irises, forcing his brain to think back.

Back to the explosions that haunted him on nights when he couldn't sleep. Buildings that came tumbling down around him and the screams of innocents as the floor fell from beneath them.

Back to the flash of guns - sometimes pointed at him and sometimes in his own, shaking hands.

Back to the spark of fire, raging and convoluted as it turned lives to cinders - ash in the wind.

The noises were just as bad, if not more so. There was no way he could mistake the odd zinging noise emanating from the guns for actual gunfire, but they were no-doubt worse.

Gunfire was familiar, at least. It was something he associated with his childhood, troubling as that may be. It reminded him of the hours he spent in the shooting range, his handlers humming their

approval as round after round embedded themselves in the dead-center of the target under his careful direction. It reminded him of the missions that swallowed his life until now. He may not have had freedom, but he'd had a purpose, an objective.

Now that he was with the Avengers, Peter didn't know what to do with himself. He was no longer a capable, prized HYDRA operative - he was no longer the Spider. He was just a severely traumatised teenager with an odd skillset.

It wasn't a bad development, necessarily. He loved living with the Avengers - every single one of them made him feel welcome in their own way - and he certainly didn't miss HYDRA, but he liked the importance he'd felt while he was there. He'd been needed - treasured, even.

All laser tag did was send him back to the past, and that was never a good thing. He may have had a purpose, but that didn't wash away the years of torture and conditioning that was painfully dredged up when he entered the room as the lights flashed and the Avengers started shooting at each other.

He'd felt like a passenger in his own body when he'd fallen against the wall and slid down it, trying desperately to understand why his hands were shaking frantically, why his legs felt like jelly, why his breath was quickening and his heart was pumping in his throat.

*What's happening? What's happening to me?*

But then Tony was there, not rising gracefully out of the dark and saving Peter from his own thoughts, but tripping over the boy instead and sprawling haphazardly on the floor, unwittingly jerking Peter from his spiral.

Once Tony had identified what, exactly, was happening to Peter ( *a panic attack?* He wasn't that weak, was he?), the man had calmed him down - something that only Tony seemed to be able to do effectively.

Peter felt his head clear of the thoughts that had been swirling around obsessively in his mind, and in their place were new ones. He didn't have to have a purpose just yet - he was allowed to just *be* , if only for a little while. He wasn't weak either, because if Peter was weak for having a panic attack then so was Tony (the man had admitted himself that the pesky things were something experienced by him too), and Peter knew that Tony was as far from weak as one could be. It was like he was taking off dirty clothes and putting on clean ones.

The shaking in his limbs didn't stop, but its fuel changed. Panic and terror were no longer running through his veins - instead there was adrenaline and a little nervousness. (Who was he kidding? A *lot* of nervousness.) Peter felt his muscles loosen from where they'd tightly coiled themselves in order to allow him to curl up in the smallest ball he could manage. And as his muscles loosened, so did his demeanour, and Peter felt a smile grace his lips, the cheekiness that had made itself



apparent over the past couple of weeks showing its face again as he shot Tony in the chest and ran away.

He ignored the brief twinge of terror in his stomach when he pulled the trigger - half expecting to hear the familiar bang and to see Tony to collapse to the floor in a steadily-growing pool of blood (he hated how clearly the image presented itself in his mind) - and the guilt that latched onto the walls of his chest as he sprinted around a corner. The man had been willing to give up his opportunity of glory against *Captain America* for Peter, but his worries were assuaged when he heard the faint chuckles from around the corner.

After that little fiasco, laser tag wasn't so shit.

He was still terrified for a while, nerves pooling in the pit of his belly and crawling up his torso as his eyes darted around restlessly, searching for any threat to his person, but then he'd rounded a corner and come face-to-face with none other than Natasha Romanov.

His muscles had reacted faster than his mind and before he could even process his own shock, or Natasha's equally surprised expression, he'd raised the gun and shot Natasha, disabling her vest. Peter stared as it blinked out, before his eyes flicked up to Natasa's face.

The woman had cracked a half smile, looking impressed (a rare sight). "Nice reflexes you have there, Peter," she said.

"Thanks, it's the spider powers."

That got a laugh out of the woman and she stepped aside, allowing Peter to continue making his way through the maze.

That incident reminded him of the fact that he knew what to do in situations like these - he'd literally been trained for it, though his life wasn't depending on his performance this time. With that realisation, all nervousness washed away and he slipped into the calm and rational armour that he used on missions.

Now, with a clear head, he could develop a strategy. There was the trusty 'sniper' tactic, in which he found a nice place to hide and shot people from there, much like what Tony had adopted, but that was boring. Besides, he hadn't had much time to exercise his powers lately - what if they got rusty? And it'd be cool to see if his spider sense worked with lasers.

Now, with a plan of attack, all Peter had to do was set it into motion.

He started by slowly herding everyone into one corner of the arena, directing them with the thumping sound of his footsteps and flickering shadow. Hopefully, some of them would take each other out and leave less work for him.

Clint was a hard one to round up - the man seemed to take this game more seriously than his actual

job. He had perched himself on top of a wall in the maze, which gave him a clear view of the entire arena, and therefore all its inhabitants. No one except Peter had found him yet because, funnily enough, people just *never* looked up.

He'd done it though, sneaking up on the man and shooting him from an angle that guaranteed the archer wouldn't see him.

"Nat, I know you're there. Show yourself, fiend," Clint shouted into the empty air, looking around frantically as Peter had struggled to stifle a giggle. After that, Peter just shot a couple more lasers Clint's way, purposefully missing him, and the man skedaddled faster than a bullet train. (Those things were *so cool*. He and Tony had spent hours discussing the various engineering and mechanic feats involved in their manufacturing.)

Once everyone was in the desired area, it was just a matter of picking them off one by one, and then circling back every two minutes or so when their vests became active again. After Steve put on a rather physically demanding show, and Thor tried to channel lighting through his gun (it had fried and the god had needed to leave to get a new one before returning to the game), Peter determined that powers were, in fact, allowed.

That only made his plan easier to enact because, believe it or not, sticky fingers and super agility were very handy in a game of laser tag. As it turned out, his spider sense did, in fact, work with lasers - something he'd discovered when Sam had tried to sneak up on him from behind while he and Clint were locked in an epic battle.

When the buzzer rang and a tinny voice from his gun told him "game over", Peter was very satisfied with how the game had gone. He'd shot Pepper and Bruce no less than thirty-four times each. Rhodey, Sam and Tony had fared no better because Peter had made sure that the corner he'd herded them all into was relatively devoid of hiding places. Steve, Thor and Natasha all did relatively well due to their various powers and training, but by no means beat him. Surprisingly, Clint was actually rather good - most of the Avengers had assumed he was exaggerating when he said he was the king of laser tag, but he actually would've lived up to that title if Peter hadn't been there.

The man had even managed to land a few good shots on Peter, but most of the time the boy had just been too fast and agile to be hit, not to mention he had a slightly unfair advantage thanks to his spider sense.

Everyone filed into the weapons room in varying stages of disarray, though they were all at least somewhat sweat-covered.

Peter hung up his gun and vest with a smirk as he peered at the scoreboard on the wall. He'd completely dominated, his point tally ahead of Clint's (who'd come second) by several thousand. "*Cosmic Exterminator* - seems fitting."

"Yeah, yeah, kid. We get it - you kicked ass," Tony said from across the room with an eye roll and a smirk of his own. "Rounding us all up like that was clever though, I'll give you that."

“Wait, rounding us up? I don’t think so - I am a lone wolf and I go where I want when I want,” Clint said proudly.

Peter chuckled. “I don’t think so, buddy. Remember when you were on top of that wall thing and ‘Natasha’ shot at you? Where did you go after that?”

A dramatic gasp from Clint. “That was you? Ugh, it makes sense now. It’s not like Nat to shoot once and then miss the next time.”

“Damn right it isn’t,” the woman in question affirmed from where she was helping Thor remove his vest - the big guy had somehow managed to get one of the armholes around his neck and was currently in a very dangerous position.

Suddenly, Tony let out a joyous whoop. He’d made his way over to the scoreboard and found that he’d beaten Steve by just eight points. The rest of the group let out a collective groan while Tony danced around the room, praising the gods of over-sized stuffed elephants.

Peter watched in amusement, grinning quietly to himself. Tony had come jogging up to him halfway through the game and asked if Peter would be willing to take a few shots at Steve with Tony’s gun. The boy saw no reason not to - he hadn’t been at the Tower long enough to develop the burning hatred for Barnaby that the others seemed to have. Hell, he hadn’t even seen the thing.

After celebrating for a solid three minutes, Tony proposed the idea of stopping at a pizza joint before heading back, to which he received an overwhelming chorus of agreement, followed by the condition, “As long as you’re paying for it!” from Sam.

“I always pay for it, dumbass,” Tony shot back.

“Language!”

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They were all gathered around a huge table in the middle of a greasy restaurant that was a couple of blocks away from the Tower, about twenty boxes of pizza stacked high on the checkered linoleum tabletop, when it happened.

They’d been digging in, satiating the ravenous hunger gnawing at their stomachs after a good two hours of laser tag. Two whole pizzas had already been lost to a food fight between Sam and Clint, and another ten went to Thor and Steve’s seemingly bottomless bellies.

Peter had nibbled on a few slices, the remnants of his panic attack having stolen his appetite from him, but mostly just sat and observed the rowdy group. It was why he was the first to notice Tony pull his phone out of his pocket and stiffen immediately at whatever he saw on the screen.

“Tony?” Peter asked, his voice cracking nervously. The man was usually unflappable, chill in a way that Peter could only dream of being. HYDRA may have taught him to hide his emotions, but the blank slate expression he adopted when he needed to quell his feelings wasn’t the same as the

simultaneously open and confident yet guarded look that Tony pulled off so frequently. Whatever he saw on his phone screen must have been bad for it to cause the obvious physical reaction that it did.

Tony's head jerked up and he stuffed his phone into his back pocket. "We need to get back to the Tower, now. FRIDAY just sent me an alert - there's two intruders within the walls. I've sent orders for the staff to be evacuated and FRI is trying to get a read on them, figure out where they're from or why they're there, but she said their stuff is pretty high tech, it's blocking her scanners," the man said urgently, already moving into action as he jogged hastily towards their car.

He opened the boot, revealing every single member's suit and basic equipment - he even had Peter's web shooters and a suitcase which presumably held the Iron Man suit.

Clint let out a low whistle. "I know I complain about you being a paranoid old man sometimes, but in this case I'll let it slide."

"Oh you will now, huh? This is gonna make our job a hell of a lot easier," Tony snapped back.

"Gentlemen, focus. There are intruders in our home and we don't know why they're there or what they want," Steve reprimanded. "We don't need your bickering right now."

They all suited up quickly, it being a process they were very well-versed in by now. Peter stood off to the sidelines, fiddling with his web shooters which he'd slipped on within two seconds. He didn't have a suit to put on, a mask to don or various weapons to attach to his extremities, so he just stood there awkwardly, watching in awe as the group of people he'd just been laughing with not five minutes before transformed into the superheroes the world knew them to be.

They were all ready to take off - Pepper and Bruce had gone to another property somewhere in New York that Tony owned, as Pepper "had work to do" and Bruce didn't want to Hulk-out inside the Tower. The staff had been successfully evacuated, but he still wanted to save Tony from any repairs. Just before they assumed their travel positions - Thor carrying Steve, Rhodey carrying Nat and Sam carrying Clint - they seemed to remember Peter's existence. He tried not to be bitter about it; after all, they'd just found out that someone had invaded their home.

"Kid, do you maybe want to sit this one out? Finish off the pizza?" Tony said gently, his Iron Man suit clanking loudly as he took a few steps towards Peter and off-setting the soft words.

Peter shook his head vehemently. "No, no way. I'm not gonna sit here while you guys are fighting for the Tower!"

"Peter, it's not safe-"

"You're kidding, right? I have my web shooters, which is more than I had when I smashed Sam during training, and it's more than I had during laser tag. If you're all allowed to go, then I should be too. Have I not proven myself to you yet?"

"It's not about that, Pete. I just don't want you to get hurt!"

"Oh, bullshit! I'm just as experienced as any of you, maybe more so. I'll be fine and there's no way you're talking me out of this. We can either waste time while you try to or we can go now but either way, I'm coming," Peter said defiantly, crossing his arms.

There was no way they were going to leave him behind for this, and if they tried he'd just follow them. Tony must have seen the resolve as it hardened in his eyes, because he sighed reluctantly and

then lifted Peter by his armpits, gesturing for the others to follow. It wasn't the most comfortable way to travel, but it was getting him where he wanted to go.

As the Tower loomed in the distance, the Avengers discussed their game plan. A full-on assault would more than likely result in civilian casualties - a downside of the Tower's location was that it was centred in a bustling sea of pedestrians, a fact they were all reminded of as they cut through the air and looked down to see the tiny figures on the ground peering up at them curiously. Instead, they decided on a more stealthy entrance. They would split up, half of them entering from above and the other half coming in from the bottom, working their way through the levels until they found the attackers or re-convened in the middle.

FRIDAY was unable to tell them where, exactly, the intruders were due to the cloaking technology they'd employed. She'd only been notified of their presence when they tried (unsuccessfully) to hack into her servers.

After the short flight - in which Clint had complained at least three times about how Sam was gripping him too tightly - they split up. Peter went with Tony, Rhodey and Nat, while the others stealthily made their way to their positions.

The four landed on the roof, and Tony hastily scanned his watch to open the door that lead down into the Avenger's quarters. After a thorough survey of all the rooms, hallways, nooks and crannies, they determined that the place was empty and moved on to Tony's lab.

"I swear, they better not be in here. I've got some VIP's that I've been working on in there," Tony muttered darkly.

"VIP's?" Rhodey questioned.

"Very Important Projects. You know I love my acronyms, Platypus."

"Are you done, boys?" Natasha interrupted, her steely glare causing the two to nod meekly and look down at their shoes. It was rather comical to Peter - seeing two fully-grown, famously powerful men cower in the heat of her gaze - until Natasha turned her glare on him, having heard the small chuckle that escaped his lips. The small grin he'd been wearing immediately slid off, before Natasha smiled gently, her gaze softening. "Alright, while you two were bickering like toddlers, I cased the room. It's clear, we should move on."

They searched room after room, eventually moving from the living area to the business levels, filled with conference rooms, labs and offices. So far, they'd come up with nothing, and when Nat contacted Clint through the comms, she verified that the other team hadn't yet either.

They were half-way through searching the medbay - a place that Peter was, unfortunately, very familiar with due to his great escape that had ended with him nearly getting hyperthermia - when he felt it; the haunting tingling at the nape of his neck, warning him of *something*.

Where?

Something .

What?

There!

The danger became obvious too fast for any normal human to react, but luckily, Peter wasn't a normal human. He saw the figure dressed in all-black emerge from the corner, an all-too-real gun held steadily in his hands, pointed straight at...

"Tony!" Peter yelled, desperately throwing himself across the white bed separating them and tackling the man to the ground. He heard the gun go off - barely registering the accompanying bang that had echoed in his nightmares since he was seven, heard Tony's grunt of surprise and pain as they crashed to the floor, felt the air ripple on his skin as the bullet flew past his arm and embedded itself in the wall, heard the figure grunt as someone - probably Natasha - took them out.

Peter scrambled off Tony, his hands hovering over the man as he stumbled groggily to his feet himself.

"I'm fine, kid, I'm fine," the genius said, shaking his head as he took in the black-uniformed figure that was currently thrashing against Natasha's firm grip and the restraints that Rhodey had begun to attach. "I guess we can add another tally to the 'Peter Saves Tony Stark's Ass' scoreboard, huh?"

"You good, Tones?" Rhodey called out from the other side of the room, going back to the task at hand after receiving a nod of affirmation from the man in question.

Peter huffed out a sigh of relief, before looking at the attacker. His blood froze in his veins and drained from his face as his throat constricted because... he knew that uniform and more importantly, he knew the white insignia that was standing out boldly against the black it was stitched onto. "T-Tony."

"Kid, what's up?" the older man said, following the boy's line of sight and furrowing his brow as his eyes landed on the intruder.

Peter stumbled towards the man - he was middle-aged, maybe forty, with a balding head and a wrinkled, sweat-stained forehead - who had been fully restrained by now. Once he got close enough he was sure, beyond certainty, that the insignia was the same one that had dominated his life for the past fourteen years. The same one that had been branded into his clothes, his weapons, even the bowl he ate out of.

HYDRA .

He hadn't escaped them, hadn't slipped out of their grasp like he thought he had. They'd found him, infiltrated his home - violated him in a way they never had before. Suddenly, before Natasha, Rhodey, or even Peter could react, the man lurched up from his prone position on the floor. Peter

stiffened, his muscles clenching so tightly he found it impossible to move, because all of a sudden it wasn't this stranger dressed in a familiar uniform lurching towards him, but his handler. Then his opponent in battle. Then a young boy, covered head to toe in blood, his trembling arm reaching out, expression begging, *begging* for help. The boy's cries rang in his ears, high-pitched and traumatising, but then he was jerked back to earth by hot breath next to his ear - stagnant and moist. It was the HYDRA operative, and Peter felt his stomach curdle as he tried desperately to get away, but his muscles are still locked in place.

"We're coming. You belong with us - звезда," the man whispered evilly, before he crunched down hard and began shaking violently, frothing at the mouth.

Peter well and truly stopped breathing then as panic rose in his body like a beast out of the shadows. That was his word - the first word that would begin the process of removing everything that made Peter who he was. HYDRA was coming for him, he couldn't escape their clutches, couldn't get away from them no matter how desperately he tried. They clung to him like cobwebs, snuck under his flesh and took his very essence away from him as they spread through his mind like mould. They were coming.

There were gentle hands on his shoulders, turning him away from the still-shaking HYDRA operative - he'd consumed a cyanide pill, Peter faintly realised. They were still using those things? - and guiding him towards a bed. Voices murmured in the background; Rhodey and Steve relaying what had happened - apparently Steve's group had found the other operative, but they'd met the same fate as the man in front of Peter. Steve had also recognised the symbol emblazoned on the chest of the uniform, which meant that they knew why they were here. They knew it was all his fault - thinking it was possible to run away from HYDRA. By doing that, he was the one who had brought them here, to the Tower, and put the other Avengers at risk because of it. They had come for him.

Natasha seemed to notice that Peter couldn't tear his eyes away from the blue-tinged corpse, and subtly stepped into his line of sight, blocking the gruesome image. Another form stepped in front of him, this time much closer, and Peter realised it was Tony. The man's mouth was moving, firing words that Peter just couldn't comprehend at rapid-fire speed.

Eventually, the other Avengers arrived to the scene. All of them shot worried glances at Peter, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He knew that he probably looked like shit - hell, he *felt* like shit - with a pale, expressionless face and shaking limbs. All he could see was the jerking body of the HYDRA agent, all he could hear was the same words, echoing hauntingly in his ears. "We're coming. You belong with us."

Peter didn't know how long he sat there in his half-comatose state, barely blinking. Tony stayed by his side the entire time - at first, he just sat there next to him, but then an arm slid around his shoulders and suddenly he was being cradled against a strong chest, the smell of motor oil and expensive cologne filling his nostrils, but not in a particularly unpleasant way. It reminded him of the workshop, of afternoons spent alone with the man, just tinkering and talking, joking and

laughing. Bit by bit, he felt himself relax. His muscles unclenched and his whirling thoughts slowed down just a little. Peter became aware enough to realise there were dried tear stains on his face, and he wasn't in the med bay anymore, but his room. When had they moved there?

Slowly, his eyelids closed, and he felt himself drift off. Tony was still there - Peter could feel the heat from his body and hear the man's strong, steady heartbeat. The sound was grounding, and helped lull him to sleep. At some point, Tony shifted him from the cradled position he'd adopted and lay him down flat on the bed, head supported by a couple of pillows and body covered with a warm blanket that smelled fresh and clean.

Tony's weight left the bed for a moment, and Peter felt that familiar swell of panic, but before he knew it the bed was dipping beside him and Tony was lying down next to him, shifting around awkwardly to get comfortable. The man started rambling, talking about anything and everything, and it was that, coupled with the overwhelming exhaustion that had seeped into his very bones, that finally allowed him to sleep.

But with sleep came terror. Dark memories that hunted him through the night, warping and twisting until they were barely recognisable but a hundred times more horrifying. He remembered the boy again - he hadn't had a name, couldn't remember it, much like Peter. He remembered the mission they'd gone on together and the cruel fate that he'd met - death, at the hands of his own partner because that boy was a *traitor*, and traitors could not be tolerated.

But now Peter was a traitor too, and they were coming for him.

He remembered the days of solitary, shut in a soundless, lightless room with nothing but his thoughts. When he comes out of that room he is shaking, his face so white it looks like it's been bleached, and the world overwhelms him. The bright, clinical light strips that line the ceiling sear his eyes, their low humming overpowering and all-consuming. Footsteps from several floors down sound as if they're right next to him and then they've transformed into something else entirely.

Gunshots. The ricochet of the gun held expertly in his palm. The sound - the horrible sound, he'll never forget it - of a bullet entering someone's head, erasing them, their lives, their memories, like they're nothing more than a bug to be squashed. The way thick, red liquid pools around their slumped form, pumping out in copious amounts that just doesn't seem possible, yet it has to be because Peter's *seen* it happen. Too many times to count.

And then he's being tortured in a basement. Hours upon hours of it, day after day. He needs to be prepared. Prepared for capture, prepared for the horrors that the outside world will surely bring. That's why they're beating him up so viciously. He needs to be prepared. That's why they're holding his head underwater until he passes out. He needs to be prepared. That's why they're stabbing him with cattle prods. He needs to be prepared.

They were coming. He needs to be prepared.

Peter shot up, panting, sweat making his shirt cling to his skin. The first thought that registered with him was that he was still in his day clothes. The second was that Tony was beside him, frantically calling his name. “Peter? Peter are you okay? Kid, look at me, please. You’re starting to freak me out!”

Slowly, Peter turned his head. Tony was kneeling next to him, hands hovering close but not too close to Peter’s shoulder. Was Tony scared to touch him? Had Peter done something to hurt someone?

“Is it okay if I touch you, Peter?”

Oh. Peter hadn’t done anything, apparently. Tony was just being nice, considerate of Peter’s feelings and wants. The nightmare had made him forget that people could be like that.

“Peter?” Tony asked again, his voice a few octaves higher than normal from worry. Peter nodded dumbly, allowing Tony to pull him into a hug. The man rubbed soothing circles on his back, murmuring meaningless yet comforting phrases in a hushed tone.

It was only then Peter realised he was crying, tears streaming silently down his face - he’d been doing that a lot lately. Was it a sign of weakness like HYDRA said? Tony didn’t seem to be shunning him for it. Gently, ever so gently, Tony led him out of bed. The man wiped his face with a washcloth, got him some fresh clothes to change into - PJ’s this time - and ushered him into the bathroom.

Peter got changed mindlessly, going through the motions while his brain went round in terrifying circles: the boy. Solitary. Gunshots. Torture. An endless cycle of misery.

When he was done, Tony led him back to bed, sat him down. “Do you want to talk about it, kid? That obviously wasn’t a dream about rainbows and unicorns.”

Peter only knew what one of those things were, but the usual curiosity that appeared whenever something unknown was mentioned did not show, and so he stared at his hands, which were clenched into tight fists in his lap, and shook his head hollowly.

“Alright then, maybe in the morning. Do you want to go back to sleep?”

Another head shake.

“Workshop?”

Peter knew he’d probably burn his eyebrows off or something in his current state, so he shook his head again.

“Do you... maybe - well, I could read to you?”

Peter perked up at that, his chest warming as he peeked up at Tony from under his fringe. A small nod.

“Yeah? Which book, kiddo?”

“I don't know many,” Peter said with a noncommittal shrug. He really only knew of Peter Pan, and he didn't feel like revisiting his time on the streets at this point.

“Well, I have an idea. This book came out when I was a not-so-young adult. It's basically a classic now - makes me feel really old. It's the only book with magic that I can actually stand.”

“Magic?”

“Yeah, kid. Ever heard of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived?”

And so FRIDAY pulled up a copy on Tony's Stark Pad, and the older man started reading. His words - J.K. Rowling's words - pulled Peter in. Soon, he wasn't Peter Parker; ex-HYDRA operative with enhancements that he didn't know how to control and a list of traumatic experiences longer than he was tall. Instead, he was Harry Potter; orphaned wizard boy that lived under the stairs and proceeded to be rescued from his relatives by a half-giant.

The story was wacky, that was for sure, but it grabbed Peter's attention and sunk its hooks into his mind. He was there as Harry went shopping in Diagon Alley, there as he boarded the Hogwarts Express, there as he got his first glimpse of Hogwarts.

They read well into the early hours of the morning, Tony's voice becoming hoarse and no-doubt painful, but the man never complained. Eventually, Peter fell asleep again, curled up with Tony's arm around him. This time his dreams weren't filled with pain and misery, but rather the magic and wonders of someone else's life.

It was freeing.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is something you've all been waiting for, but I won't say what it is for spoiler reasons :)

Thank you so much for reading and feel free to leave comments or kudos because it really makes our day.

A Surprise Guest

Chapter Notes

What's up guys, we're back with a fresh chapter. Some serious stuff goes down in this one, including something you've all been waiting for, so we hope we live up to your expectations.

Thanks to everyone who left kudos or comments on our last chapter, it really made our day to read all the awesome reviews.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took a long time for Peter to fall asleep, but Tony didn't mind.

It had been a long time since he'd read JK Rowlings' famous series. A long time since he'd read any book, in fact. These days, it felt like the only forms of reading that he actively participated in were of the '*let's read this information on the bad guys so we can catch them*' variety, or maybe the odd scanning of a menu.

But *Harry Potter*? Although Tony had enjoyed the series in his twenties, when life had revolved purely around poker, night clubs and frequently drinking himself into an alcohol-induced stupor (not to mention the reckless and unrestrained manufacture of world-destroying weapons, of course), he'd convinced himself long ago that he was beyond the days of immersing himself into fictional writing, especially fictional writing about *magic*, of all things (afterall, magic is just science that hasn't been explained yet). Such activities had no place in the life of Tony Stark, the now-Avenger who was far too busy with barely keeping his life together whilst simultaneously making sure that the lives of the bad guys fell apart. It was a taxing job, and therefore hadn't left much room for free time.

But if pulling out the old classic novels and turning a few pages for the first time in a decade was what it took to get Peter to calm down, then Tony would happily oblige. The kid had been in dire need of a distraction; Tony wasn't a mind reader, but he had a fairly clear idea of what Peter had been dreaming about. The logic spoke for itself - Peter had not only experienced a panic attack earlier during the day, as a result of Tony taking him to a place that was essentially designed specifically to trigger his traumatic past, but he'd then come face to face to a HYDRA agent who had more-than-likely contributed to said traumatic past.

And Tony would be flat-out lying to himself if he pretended he didn't feel guilty about that.

It was like a parasite, wriggling inside of him, carving him hollow, tearing him apart from the inside out. After all, he'd been the douchebag who had decided it would be a *fabulous* idea to take Peter to laser tag. He'd also been the one who had allowed Peter to then come back to the Tower, fully aware that it had been invaded by two potential threats, and also with the knowledge that there was every possibility the invasion was linked to HYDRA. Peter had already been on edge from the laser tag, and it was the experience with the HYDRA agents that had triggered the nightmare. And Tony was even more frustrated with himself, because it wasn't that he hadn't read the signs - it was that he'd *chosen to ignore them*.

He'd seen Peter falter before they entered the arena for laser tag. He'd seen the way the kid was

frozen before the guns, eyeing them as though even the notion of reaching out to touch the hard, plastic casing was too much to bear. He'd heard the uncertainty, the reluctance, the *fear* in Peter's voice. He'd observed all of this, and yet he'd ignored every single warning sign. He'd let it happen anyway.

Tony seemed to have a very unfortunate habit of doing that. It usually led to the unavoidable guilt, the parasitic growth of self-hatred that he was currently experiencing. The problem was, he knew it was nothing but his own choices that had gotten him to this point.

Again, this was a pattern that frequently occurred in his life, yet he didn't appear to be learning from his mistakes at all.

Tony sighed, pushing these thoughts of self-directed frustration out of his mind, to be examined at a later date - as he always did. The rational part of his brain told him that he couldn't ignore his feelings forever, but dealing with them was something that he was neither willing nor emotionally prepared to face. So Tony did what he was best at, what he'd done thousands of times before - buried them in the back of his mind, deep underneath a hundred other mundane thoughts, so that they were well and truly forgotten - and turned his attention, instead, to Peter.

Sleep had finally come to the kid, which was something of a relief; though Tony didn't feel tired, speaking had become increasingly painful with each hour that passed, and his throat was hoarse and dry from all the reading. At least it had paid off - Peter was well and truly out of it, and Tony doubted he would wake back up until early in the morning. Tony cast one last glance over his now-peaceful face, which appeared to have de-aged several years with the arrival of sleep (he looked much more like a boy, now, rather than a person who'd seen far, far too much), before slowly uncurling his arm from around Peter, hoping to God that it wouldn't interrupt his slumber. Thankfully, he was provided with a rare stroke of luck; Peter remained unresponsive and still as Tony quietly slipped out of bed and exited the room, closing the door gently behind him.

Robotically, and not entirely aware of what he was doing, Tony went to the kitchen and poured himself a cool glass of water. The liquid calmed his burning throat as it went down, and it also helped to clear his head, just a little. Enough for him to abandon his original plan, which had been to retreat to his workshop for the rest of the night, and instead consider something much more healthy - some sleep of his own.

Yes. Sleep. That sounded like something he should probably be doing. Sleep was an essential bodily function, after all, and Tony hadn't been getting a whole lot of it as of late. His mind made up, Tony set the glass back down and retreated into his quarters.

Sleep first. Then tomorrow, he would do something about Peter. He'd find an activity, something for them to do together - a nice, harmless, peaceful activity, one that had absolutely no potential to resurface some of Peter's more painful memories. Tony was fully aware that he was probably not the most qualified person when it came to choosing activities of this non-death-defying variety, but surely he could come up with something. Something that didn't involve another panic attack, or a nightmare.

Tomorrow, Peter was going to be happy.

He was sure of it.

Tony must have been more tired than he'd anticipated, because he ended up sleeping well into the late hours of the morning. By the time he finally arose from the deep, dark waters of sleep, it was well past breakfast and only an hour or so away from lunch.

Groaning, Tony rolled over and slowly dragged himself out of bed, wincing as he cracked several stiff joints by doing so. He was in the process of dressing in a fresh pair of jeans and a faded band T-shirt when it became apparent that he had not woken of his own accord, but by means of an interruption. Loud, panicked voices were ringing up from downstairs, muffled by the few floors between the sounds and Tony, but loud enough that he could hear the frantic nature of them. Something was going on.

Shit.

It's another HYDRA attack.

They're back and they're coming for Peter.

His heart leaping from his chest into his throat, Tony all but ran out of the room, preparing to suit-up as he threw himself into the elevator and pressed a few buttons. He was just about to summon the armour when the doors re-opened on the level of the communal area, and Tony's heart returned to its correct position within his body.

There were no men from HYDRA storming the room. There was no panicked Peter, collapsed in a heap on the floor, barely able to breathe. There was only the Avengers - Steve, Nat, Sam, Clint, Bruce, Rhodey and Thor. And - *Wanda*? That was a new development. Tony entered the room, his sudden panic melting into anger, a demand to know what was going on poised on the tip of his tongue-

And that was when he saw him.

A man that definitely did not frequent the Tower. A man that Tony had last seen on the TV, atop a deadly helicarrier and attempting to stop Steve Rogers from inserting a chip that would prevent millions of lives from being decimated in an instant. A man who had been staying in the Icebox, a high-security prison for enhanced beings, since then. A man whose mind had been controlled by HYDRA for over half a decade.

Bucky Barnes.

He was sitting sullenly on one of the couches, staring down at his feet and making no interactions whatsoever with anyone else in the room. The rest of the Avengers, by contrast, were in various states of disarray, all speaking fast and yelling over each other and arguing about something.

His heart rate quickening once more, Tony entered the room with a new urgency in his step. What the hell was Bucky Barnes doing here? Why was nobody paying attention to him? The guy was a brainwashed assassin, and whoever had thoughtlessly allowed him to enter the apartment was about to get it from Tony (although he already had a pretty firm idea of who that person was; there was only one Avenger standing in the room who knew the HYDRA operative well, after all).

"What," Tony said, raising his voice so that it cut across the heated debate that the team were having, "the *hell* is going on here?"

The fight stopped abruptly. Everyone swivelled to look at him.

If Tony had already had his suspicions about Steve's involvement in all of this, they were confirmed by the look on the man's face. He was paler than usual, and frantic, but the hard set in his jaw told Tony that he was preparing for a conflict.

Good. That's wise of him.

"Hmmm," Tony began, his stress and confusion finding an outlet through his aggressive tone. "Something about this situation strikes me as a little off. A little weird. A little, gosh, I don't know, *dangerous*. You guys got any idea why?"

Steve sighed, rubbing his face in a gesture of exhaustion. "Tony--"

"No?" Tony interrupted, not giving an inch. "No idea? I guess I'll have to spell it out then. What's striking me as a little odd, Rogers, is the fact that there's currently a trained HYDRA assassin all cosied up in our living room. You know what? Odd is an understatement. Come to think of it, *reckless* and *suicidal* are probably more fitting descriptions. So do you wanna tell me what's going on, or is everyone just cool to ignore the fact that the Winter Soldier is sitting about five feet away, and carry on with their knitting?"

Having made his point, Tony crossed his arms and waited for a response, feeling the irregular and erratic beat of his heart against his chest, a tell-tale sign of his earlier state of panic. Panic that was still there, now, because something had very clearly gone terribly wrong and Tony was all too aware that it happened while he was asleep. He was out of the loop. That was something that was guaranteed to set him off.

But instead of being presented with a clear-cut answer, his wake-up call only served to re-ignite the Avengers' earlier argument.

"I told you he'd agree with me on this," Bruce said, speaking to Steve, it seemed. "This is nuts, Steve, I know he's supposedly snapped out of it a bit, but come on. Just look at the guy, he's all kinds of messed up."

"It's not like that," Steve insisted. "You don't know what happened two years ago, he remembered something, I don't know what but it was enough to make him save my life."

"Yeah," Rhodey countered, apparently on the same side as Bruce, "and you really wanna take that chance? Just because he was all Good Samaritan a few years back, doesn't mean he's stayed that way."

"You don't know that," Nat argued. "Until he's evaluated, none of us can know that."

"Yeah, which is *exactly the problem*," Bruce emphasised. "Look, Steve, I know he's supposed to have reformed, but he's been in the Icebox for two years."

"He had a week of parole," Steve argued. "He came to the Tower, remember?"

"Yeah, *nine months ago*," Bruce replied, his voice more forceful than usual. "Who knows what happened to him since then? He could've snapped back into assassin mode, for all we know."

"It's six to one," Sam put in. "We can handle the guy."

But Tony had had enough. Slamming one frustrated hand down on the counter that overlooked into the kitchen, he all but shouted, "I'm sorry, are you all deaf? Still got no clue what's going on over here. You've got five seconds to explain before I get the suit out and beat this guy to a pulp-" he gestured angrily to Barnes, who remained frozen on the couch, apparently oblivious to the

conversation going on around him - "so you better start talking."

It was Steve who seemed to realise the extent of the resolve behind his threat, because he quickly intervened.

"Tony, the Brock Rumlow case went haywire," he explained. "We had Rumlow cornered, had the biological weapon secured, but he was wearing a suicide vest and was one second away from blowing himself to pieces. Wanda contained the explosion, hence why we're all alive, but others didn't get so lucky - a building got destroyed, some people are dead."

"I'm sorry," Wanda spoke up, regret in her eyes and a hollow tinge to her voice. "I take full responsibility for the dead. I lost control, I tried to stop anyone from getting hurt but I - I couldn't."

Steve turned to look at her, his expression hard and firm. "It's not your fault, Wanda. It's no one's but Rumlow's."

Tony's mouth was as dry as sandpaper; it felt as though there was an enormous lump in his throat, preventing any sound from escaping. Swallowing past his constricted airway, he found his voice.

"And how did this end up with Barnes coming back here?" Tony shot another glance towards Bucky, before raising an accusatory eyebrow at Steve. "Last I heard, he was in the Icebox. Where he belongs."

Steve's expression faltered, and a dark sense of foreboding shot through Tony. He might not have been Steve Rogers' biggest fan, but he'd been working with the man long enough to be able to accurately read the changes in his facial features. And based on the way the super soldier was looking at him, Tony guessed that Steve was about to reveal something he would most definitely not like.

He was, as usual, correct.

"Tony," Steve began, looking resigned to the consequences of whatever he was about to divulge, "I haven't been completely honest with you."

Tony ignored the spark of anger that these words triggered inside his chest, swallowing past the dryness in his throat in an effort to contain the impulsive fury. He didn't like where this was going, not at all, but he resolved to at least hear the whole story before lashing out, as he had a fond habit of doing when it came to Steve Rogers. Something about the guy seemed to just amplify his already-short fuse.

"Why am I not surprised?" he muttered instead, keeping the shout that was building in his throat at bay for now.

Steve took a deep breath, but did not address this comment. He remained silent for a moment, apparently steeling his nerves, before plunging bravely on.

"Ever since Bucky was sent to the Icebox, I - I've been working on getting him out," he explained evenly. "As a free man, that is. I don't think it's right that he should be held accountable for the things he did under HYDRA's control, things that he had no choice but to do. He shouldn't be taking the fall for HYDRA's actions."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Tony was fully aware that Steve had just presented a logical, reasonable, well-thought out argument, one that he respected and maybe even agreed with. But again, that spark of dangerous fury was there, threatening to set him over the edge and cloud his otherwise rational judgement.

“Just tell me what you did, Cap,” he said, folding his arms and hoping against hope that Steve would recognise the impatience in his voice. If Tony didn’t get answers soon, he wasn’t altogether sure he would be able to keep the steadily-growing swell of anger at bay.

Steve paused, but he must have heard the edge to Tony’s words, because it only took him another moment’s hesitation before he got the words out.

“I bailed Bucky out of the Icebox,” Steve said, looking Tony directly in the eye now. “I’m not going to lie to you, Tony - it wasn’t entirely legal. I had to pay a bunch of probably-dodgy people, make a few shady deals, but it happened, and now he’s free. I hired some guys who are experts at working the system from the shadows, and they managed to get him out. Hence why he’s here.”

Tony opened his mouth, closed it again. It wasn’t that he didn’t know what to say - he had probably a million different choice phrases he wanted to hurl at Steve, ranging from the mild ‘*Why would you do that?*’ variety to much more personal, explicit insults that would probably result in a very messy fight. The problem was, he didn’t know what to voice first. His chest was tight with anger, confusion, and a painful apprehension of whatever was coming next. And of course, there was the fact that Barnes himself was still sitting a few feet away, listening to every word.

Before Tony’s explosion could fully set in, though, Natasha spoke up.

“It wasn’t just him, Tony,” she said calmly. “Clint and I were in on it too. And Sam.”

“You - *what?*” Add complete disbelief to the list of conflicting emotions that were wreaking havoc inside of him. Of all the people he would predict to help set Bucky free, Natasha was just about last on the list.

“Sam and I had already come face to face with him a few times,” Natasha explained, ignoring Tony’s shock and talking as if they were merely discussing the weather. “We’d seen how he was, how HYDRA had manipulated him. So we agreed to help Steve bring him back, undo all their brainwashing. I pulled Clint in, he agreed that it was messed up. We worked on the case for ages - like Steve said, it was slightly illegal, so it wasn’t a smooth process - but just today, we finally got him out.”

“Clint? Sam?” Tony repeated. “You guys helped?”

The aforementioned both nodded, at least having the decency to look slightly apologetic.

A harsh sting of betrayal set in, made sharp by the fact that it wasn’t just Steve who had kept him out of the loop. It was, essentially, half the team.

“You could have told me,” Tony stated, unable to prevent the sharp edge in his voice. “Not trying to be a dick, but, you know, it’d be nice to have a little forewarning the next time half my team try to break out a brainwashed assassin from a high-security prison. I feel like that’s something you’d probably want to give me a heads up about, you know?”

“Would you have let us do it, though?” Sam pointed out. “You’d really agree to it?”

“Maybe not,” Tony acknowledged, “but we’re called a *team* for a reason. Going behind each other’s backs, doing illegal business - that doesn’t sound like a team to me.”

Steve cast his eyes downward at this, and for a moment Tony was sure he was going to apologise. But then he raised his gaze, and there was a determined look etched onto his features.

“Tony, what you’ve got to remember is - all those things he did as the Winter Soldier, all the

people he killed - it wasn't him," Steve began, choosing his words carefully. "It was HYDRA, they had control of his mind. Just like they had control of Peter's. You can't possibly blame Bucky for what he did without blaming Peter as well - it would be hypocritical."

Ouch. That hit home.

Tony winced as a sharp pang of some unidentifiable emotion shot through his chest, causing him physical pain. He hadn't expected Steve to sink that low; for all the man's portrayal of honour and nobility, the epitome of American patriotism, Steve could really be a snake sometimes.

But Tony couldn't deny it - the guy had a point. An annoyingly good one, too. Because as much as Tony hated to admit it, Steve was right; he couldn't condemn Barnes without condemning Peter, too. They had, essentially, been thrust into the exact same set of circumstances, and though Peter had never outright stated it, Tony was almost certain that the kid had participated in his fair share of assassinations, as well as a ton of other shady missions. And Tony could tolerate being called many things - reckless, impulsive, narcissistic - but one title that he refused to claim for himself was that of *hypocrite*.

So, reluctantly, he let the fight drain away. Let the anger melt into forced calm, attempted to see beyond the irrational fury that still clouded his brain.

"Okay," he admitted begrudgingly. "Okay. Point taken. But Cap, you gotta know that there's still a lot about this that is very far from cool. You keeping half the team out of the loop, for example. I'm speaking for myself here, but I'm pretty sure Bruce, Thor and Rhodey would agree when I say that not being told about your little jailbreak scheme? That was kinda a low blow."

Rhodey nodded fervently, confirming his agreeance. "Yep. Probably not your finest moment, Cap."

"I would have to agree with the Iron Patriot on this one," Thor added. "I've been on Earth for months, now, and it would have been nice to be included. I could have tweaked the more questionable parts of your plan, or perhaps merely broken into this Icy-Pole place with my hammer and claimed freedom for the soldier myself."

"Alright," Steve allowed, inclining his head just a little. "You have my word that I'll inform all of you of any illegal missions I undertake from now on."

"Good," Tony said. "That's good. But there's also the minor issue, Cap, of *where the hell do we go from here?* I mean, I'm not sure what your definition of *mentally stable* is, but that-" he jerked a thumb towards Bucky, who hadn't so much as twitched from his unresponsive position of the couch - "doesn't exactly fit mine. At all."

Wanda, who had remained almost entirely silent for the larger part of the conversation, took this opportunity to interject. "He's not as bad as it looks. We picked him up before, just after the - the explosion..." She paused for a moment, a pained expression crossing her face, before continuing, "and he said a few words back then."

"Oh, great, you've really got me there," Tony answered, reverting back to his usual sarcastic tone, the classic defence mechanism that he'd used countless times in the past. "He spoke a few words? Well, I'm convinced, personally, there's no way he's even just the teensiest bit unhinged-"

"Guys," Bruce interrupted, his face pale. "I hate to break in, but you're probably gonna want to see this."

Tony fell silent, following Bruce's gaze to the TV positioned on the wall opposite the Avengers, above where Bucky was sitting. Grainy footage was playing on the screen, an aerial view of what could only be Lagos, in complete disarray. The subject of the footage soon became apparent; the cameras panned to a nearby building, half-collapsed on itself in a pile of rubble and smoking ash, with at least a dozen injured people being lifted onto stretchers by paramedics in the near vicinity.

Clint grabbed the controller for the TV and turned up the volume, and a cool female voice filled the room.

"- several relief aid workers have been killed. The fatalities are presumed to be a result of the conflict that arose between Brock Rumlow, a known HYDRA operative, and several members of the Avengers, as well as Wanda Maximoff, an enhanced individual who is believed to be responsible for the decimation of this building. Although full details about this conflict are yet to be disclosed, the consequent loss of life, whether it was intentional or not, does raise some very pressing questions. Speculation from civilians is only further fuelled by more breaking news - the escape of James 'Bucky' Barnes from a high-security facility designed to contain enhanced beings." An image of Bucky's face now filled the screen. "The cause of this break-out is currently unknown, but many believe that Barnes' unauthorised escape was organised by none other than Steve Rogers, who was a friend of Barnes' before his apparent death in 1945. Over to you in the studio, Jimmy."

The TV cut to a shot of three professional-looking reporters sitting on couches, notes displayed on a table before them as they talked to the cameras.

"Thanks Susan, I'm here with Amanda and Matt to discuss the questionable intentions behind the Avengers' attack on Rumlow at Lagos," Jimmy began, gesturing to his co-workers as he talked. "Whether she meant to or not, nobody can deny that Wanda Maximoff caused the death of no fewer than twelve people today. And then there's the sudden escape of James Barnes from the Icebox, an act which is strongly suspected to have been orchestrated by Steve Rogers, perhaps with help from the other Avengers such as Tony Stark. There is strong evidence to back this up, as few other people alive would have not just the will, but the means necessary, to successfully smuggle Barnes out. What do you make of all this, Amanda?"

A professional-looking woman, dressed in a crisp blue suit with her blonde hair tied back in a neat ponytail, nodded in agreement. "Well personally, I think there's a lot of logic behind these claims," she said, addressing the camera directly. "I think in a situation like this, you can't take anything for granted. For so long, we've just assumed that the Avengers are a good thing; that they're fighting what's right, protecting us. But how do we know their true purpose? When you have a group as powerful as this, with all the resources, money and influence that they have at your disposal, you really start to wonder whether they're actually in it for us, or for themselves, for their own personal benefits. As a result of this, the Avengers' motives are now under intense scrutiny from both civilians and officials alike."

"Um, guys? What's going on?"

The tentative voice came from the direction of the elevator, and Tony instantly knew who it was; he'd heard that uncertain, hesitant tone so many times before that he'd practically memorised it. Hurriedly muting the TV, Tony turned around and saw Peter exiting the elevator, walking towards the Avengers with a cautious look in his eye.

"Oh, kid, you're up," Tony said, struggling to keep his voice calm and act as though nothing was wrong, which of course there was. Peter hadn't yet noticed Barnes, but it was bound to happen sooner or later (the kid was observant to a fault, at times) and although Tony didn't quite know

how Peter would react, or even if he would recognise the Winter Soldier at all, he had a sick feeling of foreboding at the very thought of such an interaction. The odds of Peter being A-OK with it all weren't great.

Peter nodded slowly, frowning around at them all. "Is something wrong?" he asked quietly. "I heard arguing from my room. Is everything okay?"

And then it happened - as he was slowly scanning each of the Avengers, surveying the room for something out of the ordinary, Peter's eyes fell on Bucky Barnes.

He froze.

Didn't move.

Didn't breathe.

Shit, was all Tony had time to think.

And then Peter collapsed.

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"Do you remember the Winter Soldier, Asset?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you remember what I have told you about him?"

"Of course, sir."

"Elaborate."

"He is a traitor, sir. He has betrayed HYDRA and everything we stand for. If I am to ever come across him, he is to be terminated. I am destined to be twice the Asset the Winter Soldier ever was."

"Very good. So you understand why we must do this?"

A brief moment of hesitation, not long, but enough to earn him a slap to the face. "Yes, sir."

And then they were plunging the cattle prod into his side, and the world turned white.

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"Peter!"

"Kiddo? Can you hear me?"

"Squirt, what's going on?"

The voices were loud, in his face. They echoed all around him and it felt like each word was ricocheting around inside his head. That probably explained the throbbing pain in the back of his skull.

Peter opened one eye, before immediately shutting it again. A bright light - too bright - pierced through his eyelids, making him groan and turn his head to the side, trying to avoid the irritation.

“Kid, are you awake?”

Tony. That was Tony. Why was Tony asking if he was awake?

“Unfortunately,” Peter mumbled groggily, opening his eyes again. The light wasn’t too harsh now, mainly because about five Avengers were crowded around him, their faces blocking out the bright beams. It reminded him of the scientists at HYDRA, when they would strap him to a table and poke all sorts of foreign equipment into his skin - not a good memory to think about in his sub-par emotional state.

Tony must have noticed his discomfort, because he quickly shooed them all away. “You took quite a hit to your noggin there, Pete.”

“Yeah, I can tell,” Peter replied absently as he reached a hand behind his head and rubbed the aching spot. There was an egg-sized lump developing but Peter couldn’t feel any blood leaking from the wound, so he took that as a relatively good sign. Once he was sure that he didn’t have any permanent brain damage, Peter tried to sit up, but Tony put a firm hand on his chest and pushed him back down.

“Hang on, let Bruce give you a once over before you hurt yourself again.”

“Ugh, fine.”

“Hey, Peter. How are you feeling?” the man in question asked as his face appeared in Peter’s view.

“About as good as you’d expect.”

Bruce chuckled as he continued his examinations. After gently probing the tender area, shining a horrid light in his eyes and testing his balance, Bruce announced that Peter did not have a concussion, but recommended at least half an hour of bed rest. When Peter groaned in response, Bruce told him he was lucky it wasn’t longer, and that without his enhanced healing, the whole fiasco could’ve been much worse. Peter shut up after that.

Tony helped him unsteadily to his feet, and everything was going well until they turned around and Peter saw *him*. The face that he had been constantly shown, constantly pressured to be better than, constantly told to avoid going down the same path as. The fact that was the reason he had been treated so harshly at HYDRA in the first place. The face that betrayed HYDRA. *The Winter Soldier*.

Peter keeled backwards hastily until his back hit a wall. His breath came in harsh pants and then it wasn’t coming at all. *He couldn’t breathe*. He couldn’t breathe and *he* was still looking at him with his cold, expressionless eyes and blank face and-

“Steve, get Barnes out of here!” Tony barked harshly before stepping into Peter’s line of sight, completely blocking out everything else. All Peter could see was Tony’s face; his dark eyes, such a different shade to *his*, and so full of a familiar warmth, though currently that warmth was overrun with concern. His olive skin was crinkled with laugh lines, but the frown lines were far more prominent, and only getting deeper with each second he looked at Peter. Peter felt a stab of guilt in his stomach - he’d caused the man so much trouble recently, and he had a feeling he was only going to cause a lot more. Why did he have to keep freaking out like this?

“Pete, you need to breathe, okay? In and out just like this,” Tony soothed, taking big, exaggerated breaths. Peter felt his chest loosen as he heard footsteps leave the room, and finally, *finally* he was able to suck in some of the air that his burning lungs were craving so desperately. “Yeah, just like that. I’m sorry, kid, I’m really sorry. I completely forgot he was there and then I was in such a rush to get you to bed and I just-” Tony cut himself off with a sigh. “I screwed up. I’m sorry, kid.”

Peter, still trying to return his breathing to normal, just offered a shaky smile and a tentative thumbs up.

“Alright, let’s get you to your room.”

And before he knew it, Peter was lying on top of the covers of his bed, propped up on a mound of pillows. Tony was sitting in a chair next to his bed, reading Harry Potter again, but Peter wasn’t really listening. His mind was wandering, thinking back to what Tony had said to Steve about The Winter Soldier.

He’d said ‘Barnes’, not the Winter Soldier. HYDRA had always told him that the Winter Soldier was nothing more than an asset, something to be used, and then later, he’d been told he was a filthy traitor. He wasn’t a person, and he certainly didn’t have a *name*. Everything else HYDRA had told him turned out to be a lie, so did that mean that the Winter Soldier wasn’t truly the mindless husk that he’d been told he was?

The bed sunk next to him, and it was only then that Peter realised Tony had stopped reading. He recognised the familiar smell of motor oil and expensive cologne, which meant the man had moved from his chair to the bed.

“Peter? What are you thinking about, kiddo? I made up a whole paragraph about giant pink ponies roaming the grounds of Hogwarts just to be annoying before I realised you weren’t listening to me at all.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry. It’s just-nothing. It’s nothing.”

“You don’t sound so sure about that, kid. What are you really thinking?”

“Does-does the Winter Soldier have, uh, a name?”

Tony looked distinctly taken aback. His mouth opened and closed a few times before he seemed to decide on what he was going to say. “Yeah, he does. It’s James Barnes, but Steve calls him Bucky. I think it’s something to do with the guy’s middle name.”

“James Barnes,” Peter repeated, rolling the name around on his tongue. “Bucky.”

“Yeah, why do you ask?”

Peter doesn’t reply. The Winter Soldier had a real name. One that’s actually his, and not one he stole from a book. He had other names too, a middle name and a last name and a nickname (Tony had explained the concept of those to Peter the first time he’d called him ‘Pete’). If the Winter Soldier had a name...that meant HYDRA had lied about that, and probably everything else they told him about the Winter Soldier - Barnes.

The man was just as human as Peter, maybe even more so. He had people that remembered his life before HYDRA. He had a real *name*.

And he’d been brainwashed, just like Peter.

“Tell me what you know about him,” Peter said, the request surprising him almost as much as it appeared to surprise Tony.

“Uh, well, Steve assures me that Barnes- *Bucky* , is relatively stable, mentally. I’m not sure how comforting that’s supposed to be, but I think it means he won’t go into ‘mind-controlled assassin’ mode on us. Hopefully.”

Peter nodded, staring intently at the ceiling and purposefully avoiding looking at the man. “Does that mean he hasn’t fully shaken off the brainwashing?”

“Yeah, I guess so. HYDRA brainwashing isn’t my area of expertise, but he doesn’t really look one hundred percent back to normal. Which makes me wonder how you did it so easily - overcome the brainwashing, I mean. They’d been doing it to you for your entire life, and you’re just a kid. Manchurian Candidate over there is a grown-ass man and he still hasn’t managed to shake it.”

“Our wiping processes were different,” Peter explained slowly, as he recalled what little details he’d been told by HYDRA. “They took his and made it better, then used it on me. Barnes’ mind was wiped clean of... everything - memories, emotions, original thoughts, all gone. All that was left was the desire to serve his masters, and his sole reason for existence was to follow orders. He had no control over what he did or how he did it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tony muttered, looking stricken.

“Whereas with me, my memories of my time before HYDRA were removed and I was made more... susceptible to orders. I retained my knowledge and the ability to deviate slightly from orders if I deemed it necessary. My emotions were controlled through... other methods” - *like torture*, he thought but did not say - “but it never even occurred to me that I could leave. I thought HYDRA was everything there was to life and I didn’t have a reason to run. I didn’t know if I had any family out there waiting for me or how to function outside the life I was given, so the thought never even crossed my mind,” Peter finished numbly, staring down at his hands. Would Tony be mad at him for allowing HYDRA to dictate his life so much longer than he should have? Would he be mad that he followed their orders without question and ignored the odd twinge in his gut every time he did something for them, the twinge of his conscience that said, ‘ *this is not right* ’?

“Kid, look at me.” Tony said softly, his voice laced with more of that familiar concern. Peter obliged, somewhat begrudgingly. “You’ve been dealt a shitty hand in life, so far, and that’s coming from someone who’s hand hasn’t been so great either. But what has happened to you is not your fault and the stuff HYDRA made you do is not your fault. In fact, you’re probably the most faultless person in this scenario.”

“But I let them manipulate me. I could’ve walked away at any time and I just didn’t!”

“Could you really have walked away at anytime? You were still brainwashed, Pete, still manipulated, still scared. You didn’t have free will while you were there, but something happened before you left, didn’t it?”

“I-I think so. I was tasked with assassinating someone, I can’t even remember who anymore. It’d always been drilled into me that I had to complete the mission at all costs. If something or someone got in my way, they were to be terminated and I-I had no problems following that rule until my last mission. There-there was this kid, and his dad. They were at the park where my target visited at the same time every day and they were about to find me in the tree that I was hiding in. The kid was climbing it but then he fell down, hurt his ankle or something. He was in hysterics, crying, and I was in the middle of lining up my shot because they were so close to discovering my position...” Peter stopped, gulped.

“It’s okay, kid. Not your fault, remember?”

Peter nodded, before plunging bravely on. “But then the dad started singing this song - a nursery rhyme, or something stupid or something stupid like that. I think it’s called Twinkle Twinkle. Anyway he started singing it and then I just... remembered. It wasn’t much, just a woman singing that same song, maybe my mother?” He fell silent for a moment, lost in the depths of the memory, before shaking himself out of it and continuing, “But it kind of, uh, shook me out of the brainwashing. Suddenly, I had no idea why I was holding this gun and pointing it at some poor kid’s head. What HYDRA was asking me to do, what they’d taught me to do, it was wrong, it was bad and I realised that for the first time in my life. It was so strange and I didn’t know what to do because I’d never felt like that before. Ever. I just dropped out of that tree, probably scared the shit out that dad and his kid, and then I ran away.”

“Fuck.”

“That pretty much sums it up, yeah.”

“*Fuck*, kid.”

“You’ve already said that, Tony.”

“So, the thing that helped you shake the mind control was being reminded of your past?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“That makes sense. Steve said that Bucky seemed to remember at least something when they had their little catfight.”

“So to get *Bucky* back, we need to remind him of his past?”

“Seems like Steve’s kinda thing, I’ll let him know, but we aren’t done talking just yet, mister. Have a rest, you look dead on your feet, and I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“What do we need to talk about?”

“Nope, sleep.”

“But-”

“*Sleep*.”

“Fine,” Peter huffed, crossing his arms across his chest. The defiance was just for show - he needed to keep up appearances, after all - but the exhaustion felt bone-deep and his eyelids were barely staying open by themselves. Probably a side effect of almost getting a concussion, being woken up in the middle of the night by not-so-pleasant dreams (nightmares), seeing a ghost from his past and being assaulted by HYDRA operatives. Come to think of it, Peter was now pretty sure he knew what Tony wanted to talk about. They hadn’t really had the chance yesterday, what with Peter’s comatose state.

“One more thing, Pete,” Tony said from the doorway, which he was halfway through exiting. Peter must have been more tired than he thought, because he could not remember Tony walking there.

“Do you think we can trust him?”

Peter didn’t need to question who ‘he’ was, but he did need to think about the question itself. On the one hand, Barnes was in much the same boat as Peter himself; he’d been brainwashed, manipulated and tortured into doing the bidding of an evil organisation and was only just discovering (or re-discovering, in Barnes’ case) what it meant to be a person. On the other hand, Barnes was still at least partially brainwashed by HYDRA, and his ability to make his own decisions was questionable at best. On top of that, the one choice that he did actually make for

himself had led to more pain and trauma for Peter. So, he was honest. "I don't know."

"Okay, kid, get some sleep," Tony said with a tired sigh as he partially shut the door and flicked off the lights.

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Peter woke to screaming. It was high pitched, undulating and a rather disconcerting sound to hear after coming back to consciousness. Immediately, his senses were on high alert and he clambered stealthy out of bed, ignoring his dry mouth and cramped muscles. He must have been asleep for at least a couple of hours.

Slowly, Peter eased open his bedroom door and then cautiously stuck his head out. The screaming was gradually getting louder, but now that he was actually paying attention, it sounded more like shrieking. All of a sudden, Clint rounded the corner of the hallway and Peter found the source of the awful noise.

The man was sprinting, his legs pumping as fast as they could go, and as he rocketed past Peter's door, all the boy had time to see was Clint's face, painted with bright purple stripes.

After Clint had disappeared down the hallway, Sam appeared from around the same corner Clint had come from. The man was going much slower than Clint, probably due to the white sticky substance that coated him from head to toe, a substance that looked suspiciously like Peter's web fluid. He was brandishing a pair of kitchen tongs, and a string of profanities too foul for most people's ears were being spat out of his mouth at a rapid rate.

Peter was very confused.

Once the pair had passed, he slipped out of his room and padded down the hallway, keeping an ear out for any purple-painted adults or brainwashed HYDRA assassins. The interaction with the latter had left him nervous, jittery in a way he hadn't been in a very long time. HYDRA had taught him to suppress nerves and he'd never had a reason to feel them with the Avengers, until now.

Now, there was a possibly dangerous assassin haunting the halls of his home and Peter really didn't want to run into him, especially not while he was as vulnerable as he felt after his nap.

He turned the corner into the kitchen, hesitating slightly before entering to make sure Barnes wasn't lurking in any shadowy crevices. Peter may have realised that the guy was just as human as he was, but there were still many, *many* negative connotations involved with him. It was another one of those things that was uncontrollable, ingrained into him by HYDRA's brainwashing.

"Oh, hey, Peter. How's your head?" Bruce asked as soon as Peter walked through the door. "Thor told me to tell you that Natasha says that Tony is in his lab and wants you to know that Steve and Bucky are on a separate floor and working on getting his memories back. Also, heads up, Sam and Clint have engaged in a prank war." The man was sitting at the kitchen bench and reading a book - he hadn't even looked up as he'd rattled off his mini monologue.

"Uh, my head is-it's good. Fine. My healing is working. But, uh, Thor said what?"

Bruce chuckled and closed his book, sliding his glasses off his nose and cleaning the lenses on his shirt. "In short, Tony is in his lab and wants you to know that Steve and Bucky are on a different floor, trying out the tactic you mentioned. Nice work coming up with that, by the way. Brainwashing is frowned upon by many people, myself included, but the way it works is so interesting..."



“Bruce, don’t take this the wrong way, but that’s kind of weird.”

Bruce shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a man of science.”

“Uh, okay. Well, I’m going to go find Tony,” Peter said awkwardly, before grabbing an apple and scuttling out of the kitchen.

FRIDAY confirmed that Tony was still in his workshop, and also informed him that he’d been asleep for four hours. He must have been tired because usually, he couldn’t sleep during the day at all, yet here he was having taken a four-hour-long nap.

“Tony?” Peter said as he entered the workshop. The place was a mess; scrap parts and balled up pieces of paper were everywhere, and the faint aroma of solder permeated the air. Normally, Tony’s workshop was a whirlwind of organised chaos and constructive movement, but now it just looked like an eerily still trash pile.

That was until Peter picked up on a rustling sound coming from a pile of dusty, cardboard boxes.

“Tony? Is that you?” he called out as he drew closer. No reply. Peter walked closer, his muscles coiling as his weariness heightened with each moment the silence stretched on.

“Peter! Wh-” Tony said, appearing suddenly from behind a pile of boxes. Unfortunately for him, it was not a good idea to startle Peter when he was already poised for action; before anyone knew it, Tony was clutching his throat, gasping as he desperately tried to pull in air.

“Tony! Oh my God, I’m so sorry! I swear I didn’t mean to punch you, I just-you startled me and I was kinda on edge already. I’m so sorry, are you okay? Do you need anything? Better get some corticosteroids to treat that laryngeal fracture!”

“Did-did you just... reference,” a hoarse cough, “Brooklyn Nine-Nine after punching me in the throat?”

“I’m sorry,” Peter repeated, “and yes. Thor got me hooked, we’ve been having marathons. Come to think of it, how did you pick up on that reference? You don’t strike me as the... Brooklyn Nine-Nine watching type.”

“It’s fine, kid, I’ve had worse,” Tony rasped in response. “Believe it or not, Thor got me hooked too - I’ve been watching it with Pepper. She hates it, but not as much as she hates Dr. Phil.”

“Really? We should watch it together!”

“Totally, kid,” Tony said as he made his way over to the first aid drawer and pulled out an ice pack, wrapping it in a tea towel and placing it on his neck.

Peter winced. “Sorry,” he said for the third time.

“What’d I tell you about apologising unnecessarily?” Tony sighed in exasperation. “It was my fault for startling you.”

“What’d Pepper tell you about shouldering blame unnecessarily? It was my fault for punching you.”

“Wow, kid, just wow. I see you and Pepper have been having some nice chats lately.”

“Oh yes, it’s lovely to rant about how annoying you are to someone that’s not you.”

“Rude. The betrayal stings,” Tony said dryly, though a smile pulled at his lips.

“On a completely unrelated note, where did all this mess come from?” Peter asked, gesturing to the disarrayed state of the lab.

“Uh, Steve asked me to dig through my dad’s old files on him to see if there’s any information on him and Bucky in there. Steve’s trying to remember everything he and Bucky ever did, but it’s a slow process and he’s worried he could miss something. Right now, I’m pretty sure Steve is just telling Bucky his entire life story and seeing if anything causes a reaction.”

“Oh, did you... find anything?”

“Not really,” Tony sighed again. “I’ve combed through it all twice, but all I can find is the mission reports from the Howling Commandos - you know who they are, right? - and Bucky’s death certificate. Not exactly helpful, but I’m going to bring them to Steve anyway.”

“Yeah, I do know the Howling Commandos,” Peter recalled. “HYDRA gave me a very thorough lesson on the activities of Captain America before and after the whole ice debacle. But, uh, can I... come?”

“Um, are you sure that’s a good idea, Peter?”

“Yes, well, no, but I want to. I need to-to remember that he is a human being too, and he’s just like me. Same situation, same issue.”

“Well, I’d say you’re a little less murderous and a whole lot cuter.”

Peter blushed, deciding to ignore this. “*And*,” he continued pointedly, “I might be able to provide valuable information. I think the thing that helped me shake off the brainwashing means a lot to me, or it did, at one point. If Barnes and I are the same-ish, then it won’t be any random detail that helps him shake it, but something important to him.”

“Huh, well, if you’re sure,” Tony agreed easily.

“I am.”

They entered the elevator and Peter could feel the nervous energy buzzing through him. Apparently, Tony could too because the man sent him several cautious looks throughout the ride and put his hand on Peter’s shoulder to steady him when they get out.

As they reached the door, Peter heard the low murmur of Steve’s voice, occasionally interspersed with hums of interest from Barnes. Involuntarily, his feet slowed and he stopped hesitantly. Tony shot him another look.

“Are you sure about this?” the billionaire asked, doubt etched into every inch of his expression.

“Yeah-yes. I’m sure.”

“Alrighty then,” Tony acquiesced, before rapping his knuckles against the hard surface. “Room service!”

The voice paused momentarily, before calling out, “Come in, Tony!”

They pushed open the door and entered. Peter felt himself stiffen at the sight of Barnes, but he reminded himself again that the man was not a threat. In fact, the man was in the same boat as Peter. The man was trying to get better and deserved that chance just as much as Peter did. And Peter would help him. It was the right thing to do.

Steve was a little shocked by his appearance. “Oh, hi, Peter. How’s your head?” he asked, apology

lacing the words.

“It’s fine, thanks. Advanced healing helps.”

“yeah, I bet it would.”

They lapsed into a tense silence, while Bucky stared at the group blankly. He seemed to have morphed into less of an empty husk and more of an emotionally inept slug. An improvement, though not by much. Tony cleared his throat awkwardly and handed the files to Steve.

“It’s not much; just some of the Howling Commandos mission files and his death report, but maybe it’ll do something. I think Peter will be of more help though.”

Bucky twitched slightly at the mention of the Howling Commandos, and everyone stared at him for a few seconds, weary but hopeful. He made no other move though, and they turned back to their conversation.

“What do you know, Peter?” Steve asked Peter carefully.

“Well,” Peter began, “when I kind of, uh, shook off the brainwashing, it was because someone reminded me of my past. HYDRA had taken those memories from me but I got a few back when this dad sang a lullaby to his kid. That’s a whole other story, but the bottom line is you need something that means something to him. It won’t be a random moment that undoes years of HYDRA conditioning.”

“Right, okay, something that means something to him,” Steve murmured, frowning slightly in thought. He turned back to Barnes, and Tony and Peter backed away towards the wall. Tony pulled on Peter’s sleeve and gestured towards the door, but Peter shook his head. He needed to be there to see the change in Barnes, otherwise he’d never believe it.

“Uh, Bucky? Do you remember what you said when you went off to war? You told me not to do anything stupid until you got back and then I said, how can I? You’re taking all the stupid with you,” Steve said softly, his voice filled with hope. Bucky cocked his head to the side, regarding Steve with a kind of almost-recognition. His eye twitched and he shook his head, eyebrows furrowing.

“What about the thing you always used to call me? What was it? Uh, a punk. You called me a little punk all the time.”

Barnes’ eyes widen a little.

“Oh, and there’s this thing we used to say. I want you to know that it’s still true, even now. I’m with you, Bucky, till the end of the line.”

Barnes sucked in a sharp breath, and Peter noticed that the half-recognition in his eyes had turned into a glassy-eyed certainty. “Steve?” he croaked out, as if hardly daring to believe it.

“Yeah, it’s me Buck,” Steve grinned, jumping to his feet. Bucky stood shakily from his chair too and then the two men embraced, holding each other tightly, and before Peter knew it, he was watching the great Captain America and the infamous Winter Soldier cry in each other’s arms.

Tony pulled on Peter’s sleeve again, and this time he allowed himself to be pulled out, a half smile planted on his face. The Winter Soldier was gone, and in his place stood James ‘Bucky’ Barnes.

For the first time since Bucky had arrived in the Tower, Peter allowed himself to breathe freely.

## Chapter End Notes

Andddd that's it for now. We hope you enjoyed our take on the civil war plot line (although it's not completed yet, trust me). More to come soon...

# In Accordance With The Media

## Chapter Notes

Heads up ya'll, the chapter title is a pun... we just couldn't help ourselves. The opportunity was right there and we took it!  
Anyway we hope you enjoy this - it's a long one, around 15,000 words so that's great.  
It means a lot of juicy content if we've done our jobs right!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The following weeks passed slowly, almost painstakingly so at first. Although Peter seemed slightly more comfortable around Barnes - if your definition of comfortable was *not having a fully blown panic attack*, that was - it still took several long days before the kid could even stand being in the same room as Bucky without looking as though he was having an internal scream-fest. Tony could tell that Peter tried to hide it as best as he could, but he was an expert on the kid's mannerisms by now, and was more than capable of identifying a classic case of emotional repression when he saw one.

It took time, but slowly, Peter seemed to loosen up around Bucky. His stance gradually changed from 'ready to charge at you wielding a couple of kitchen knives if you so much as blink the wrong way' to something that was less HYDRA-assassin-like and more... relaxed. And though Tony would consider it a stretch to say that the kid eventually grew comfortable around Barnes, he certainly seemed to be able to *tolerate* him, at least.

Things in the Tower started to get easier, then. Less tense, and with much fewer threats of murder being conveyed by overly-alert body stances (of which both Peter and Bucky seemed to be experts at exhibiting). Without the usually ever-present distraction of bad guys, the Avengers turned to a much more domestic approach to pass their time. Several more tournaments of Mario Kart were played, which only served to further damage Clint's ego as Peter won without fail every time. Steve had struck up the habit of boxing with Peter several times a week, and Sam had dutifully took it upon himself to teach the kid how to cook. Peter had already mastered pancakes, bacon and eggs, and spaghetti bolognese - three dishes that were, in Sam's eyes, essential staples in the world of food (Tony couldn't disagree with this). And aside from the occasional strategy meeting about how to best deal with HYDRA's looming threat, no more attacks to the Tower came. Things settled into a content and stable rhythm during the day, something that Tony hadn't experienced for a long time.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the night.

Whatever confidence Peter had gained during his waking hours around Bucky was more than eliminated by the time in which he was supposed to be asleep. Since experiencing his first nightmare after the HYDRA attack on the Tower, the stubborn things had simply refused to go away. Tony couldn't recall a night in the past three weeks that the kid hadn't woken from his anything-but-restful sleep in a state of absolute panic, his limbs shaking and skin caked with clammy sweat. Tony wasn't sure what it was, specifically, that had triggered this apparently endless onset of night terrors; was it to do with the HYDRA attack, the return of Bucky, a combination of both, or something else entirely? Whatever the reason was, Peter showed no signs of revealing it anytime soon; although Tony continually asked him if he wanted to talk about his

nightmares, so far Peter had replied with nothing but a firm, albeit slightly apologetic, *no*. And Tony wasn't about to force the kid into a heart-to-heart that Peter didn't even want to participate in - he understood only too well that sometimes, things were better left alone until the person was ready to talk about them.

So he never pushed Peter to open up, instead distracting the kid with a variety of other mundane activities. Sometimes they would play mindless games, like Twenty Questions or Would You Rather (Tony was still in disbelief from the one time when Peter had said he'd rather go watch a live concert of Queen than AC/DC - an ultimate betrayal, in his opinion, especially as he'd spent so much valuable time educating the kid about his personally-developed hierarchy of rock bands, with AC/DC being at the top); other nights Tony would read chapter after chapter of *Harry Potter* to the kid, his throat becoming progressively hoarser by the minute until Peter finally drifted off. The fact that they'd already made it to *The Goblet of Fire*, the fourth instalment in the series, was tangible evidence of how frequently the nightmares had been occurring. And then there were some nights when they wouldn't do anything at all, but rather sit in mere silence, Tony's arm wrapped around Peter in what he hoped was a comforting embrace. He wasn't sure that he'd completely nailed the whole notion of a *hug*, yet, but he was trying his best, and at any rate it usually seemed to help Peter fall asleep. It appeared that the kid was helping him to become marginally less emotionally incapacitated (an issue that he'd inherited from his father, and one that he severely detested).

"Just give it time," Pepper had advised him, when he'd brought up the matter of Peter's recurring nightmares to her. "You sound like you're doing a great job helping him through them, anyway. Apart from calming him down, there's not really a whole lot else you can do."

And so Tony patiently and uncomplainingly entered Peter's room every night without fail (he'd quickly developed a system within FRIDAY that would notify him whenever Peter's heart rate became erratic, signalling a nightmare), immediately taking calm action with a distraction of the kid's choice. Whenever Peter tried to apologise for the burden he claimed to be causing, Tony would wave off the sentiment with a dismissive hand, telling him for what felt like the millionth time that there was no need to apologise for things beyond his control. The nights began to settle into a structure as well, one that was much less desirable than the easy routine of their days, and Tony tried to ignore the fact that he hadn't slept more than four hours each night in three weeks straight.

Finally, half a week before Christmas Day, this dynamic, polarising routine of happy days, not-so-happy nights was abruptly pulled from underneath Tony's feet. And the cause of this interruption was a man named Thaddeus Ross, the secretary of state.

"You know, five years ago, I had a heart attack, and dropped right in the middle of my backswing," Ross stated on that particularly gloomy morning, standing before the Avengers seated around a table. "Turned out it was the best round of my life, because after thirteen hours of surgery and a triple bypass, I found something forty years in the army had never taught me."

*And what, pray tell, did you discover?* Tony felt like voicing, using his specialised saturated-with-sarcasm tone that he only reserved for the utmost of douchebags. This was a label which undeniably and categorically fit Ross; he didn't even know the guy's motivations yet and could already tell that they were going to be far from *best bros*. Still, he refrained from voicing these thoughts.

"Perspective," Ross said proudly, as though he'd just come up with the cure for cancer, rather than a simple sixth-grade spelling word to describe his apparent golf-induced epiphany.

"The world owes the Avengers an unpayable debt," he continued, upon realising that exactly none

of the Avengers intended to further question this so-called perspective that Ross had gained. ““You have fought for us, protected us, risked your lives....”

God, could the guy drone on any slower? Tony had met more than his fair share of intellectually challenged people in his life, but this Ross’s ramblings sounded even more dim-witted than Marv Merchant from *Home Alone*.

“...but while a great many people see you as heroes,” Ross rumbled on, “there are some....”

Idly, Tony wondered if it would be appropriate to challenge this man to a game of golf. He didn’t even play golf (it was barely a sport, in Tony’s opinion) but if Ross’s *backswing* was even half as bad as his description had suggested, Tony was willing to bet that he’d clean the guy up easily.

Finally, the unnecessarily long pause ended, and Ross appeared to use his last three remaining brain cells to piece together the rest of the sentence.

“....who would prefer the word *vigilantes*.”

Abruptly, Tony abandoned his happy internal fantasy of beating Ross in a round of putt-putt golf and returned his focus to the issue at hand. He had an inkling, now, of where Ross was going with this conversation, and judging by the looks on Steve’s and Nat’s faces, they’d worked it out too.

“What word would you use, Mr Secretary?” Natasha challenged.

“How about ‘dangerous’?” Ross replied evenly, still in that same painful drone. “What would you call a group of US-based, enhanced individuals who routinely ignore sovereign borders and inflict their will wherever they choose - and who, frankly, seem unconcerned about what they leave behind?”

Ross turned away from the Avengers and flicked a remote towards the projector pad that sat before them. Immediately, a translucent image of Manhattan in chaos filled the screen, and Tony didn’t need Ross’s affirmation to know the event he was witnessing.

“New York,” Ross said anyway, thus triggering Tony’s apparent inability to breathe.

*God damn this verbally-challenged old coot.*

His chest tightening painfully, Tony struggled to return his heart rate to a level that wasn’t going to send him into cardiac arrest. Apparently oblivious to the internal panic he had caused, Ross continued to flip through the projector screen.

“Washington, D.C.” An image of the HYDRA-led helicarriers equipped with Zola’s algorithm replaced the one of New York being attacked by aliens, allowing Tony’s throat to loosen somewhat. “Sokovia.”

*Well, there goes my remaining oxygen supply.* The panic returned full force as Tony stared up at the floating piece of Sokovia, the near-extinction event that he, Tony, had caused.

“Lagos,” Ross went on, as Tony silently suffocated in a pool of his own self-loathing. At least he didn’t have to suffer alone, this time; at the sight of the smashed building, Wanda’s expression had contorted into one of intense guilt, an image that he knew was perfectly replicated on his own features.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Steve put in quietly, apparently noticing Tony and Wanda’s silent struggles. His long list of differences between the man temporarily melted away, and Tony felt a

sudden, unprecedented rush of gratitude towards Steve Rogers.

“For the past four years you’ve operated with unlimited power and no supervision,” Ross continued, flicking away the projected image of Lagos. “That’s an arrangement the governments of the world can no longer tolerate. But I think we have a solution.”

Placing an official-looking document on the table before them, he went on, “The Sokovia Accords. Approved by 117 countries, it states that the Avengers shall no longer be a private organisation. Instead, they’ll operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel, only when and if that panel deems it necessary.”

There was a silence. Tony took a few steadying breaths, trying to wrap his head around what Ross had just revealed. He wanted the Avengers to be government-led. Controlled by the UN. No longer free to run around and do whatever the hell they wanted, in other words.

It...didn’t sound as unappealing as it should have.

“The Avengers were formed to make the world a safer place,” Steve said steadily. “I feel we’ve done that.”

“If I misplaced a couple of thirty megaton nukes, you can bet there’d be consequences,” Ross replied pointedly. “Compromise. Reassurance. That’s how the world works. Believe me, this is the middle ground.”

“So, there are contingencies,” Rhodey surmised, eyes calculating.

“Three days from now, the UN meets in Vienna to ratify the Accords,” Ross answered. “Talk it over.”

“And if we come to a decision you don’t like?” Natasha questioned.

“Then you retire,” Ross said coolly.

It made sense. It made a whole lot of sense. They’d messed a lot of stuff up; it was only natural that the government was going to come play round-up at some point. And it wasn’t that Tony *wanted* to give up the Avengers, make them a non-private organisation; if he was given a choice, he would opt to remain free of government intervention. But Tony could already tell, from the warning in Ross’s voice to the hard set of his eyes, that there was no choice here. There was only the pretence, the facade, of an option, to adhere to the country’s proclaimed freedom of speech. But it would only be a matter of time before these Accords were implemented, and Tony would rather allow it to happen willingly than be forced. At least this way, there were less consequences.

And it wasn’t like he’d done too well leading the Avengers as a private organisation, either. Last time he’d tried to take matters into his own hands, he’d accidentally created a super-bot capable of wiping out entire cities.

Fucking things up was just one of his many, many undesirable skill sets.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Steve announced, as soon as Ross had left the vicinity. “We’ve gotta sort this out, but I’d rather not do it here. And Bruce, call in Vision. He needs to be here for this.”

Tony glanced over at Steve. There was an edge to his voice, and his jaw was set in that way that it always did when the man planned on being a stubborn brat.

He had a bad feeling that Steve wasn’t on the same page as him. After all, *he* wasn’t the one who



had caused Ultron.

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His bad feeling was right. As usual.

Half an hour later, Tony sat slumped down on the sofa, his head throbbing relentlessly against the palm of his hand as he listened to the rest of the team, now including Vision and Bucky, argue back and forth about the Accords. His earlier state of panic had now progressed into the anxiety-equivalent of a hangover, and it felt as though a small bowling ball game was being played by elephants inside his brain.

“Tony,” Natasha said quietly, from the couch opposite him. “You’re being uncharacteristically non-hypervocal.”

Tony barely had time to form a response before Steve ever-so-graciously took the job for him.

“It’s because he’s already made up his mind.”

“Oh boy, you know me so well,” Tony drawled in response, wincing as he stood up from the couch.

From beside him, Peter glanced up at Tony, a look of concern echoing around in those chocolate brown eyes of his. The kid had rejoined Tony and the others as soon as they had returned from their far-from-friendly meeting with Ross.

“Are you okay, Tony?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, I’m fine kid,” Tony muttered. “Just nursing an electromagnetic headache.” Stretching out the cricks in his neck, Tony staggered over to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water, taking deliberately exaggerated sips for several moments. Once the throbbing in his head had been reduced from unbearable to slightly-less-unbearable, he set the glass down.

“There’s no decision-making process here,” Tony announced. “We need to be put in check. Whatever form that takes, I’m game,” He could feel the eyes of everyone in the room trained on him, including Peter. “If we can’t accept limitations, if we’re boundary-less, we’re no better than the bad guys.”

Personally, Tony thought it was a fairly persuasive speech, all things considered, but apparently Steve didn’t feel the same way. The man’s arms were folded, and he had that stubborn-ass look back in his eyes that Tony was all-too familiar with.

“Tony, someone dies on your watch, you don’t give up,” Steve argued calmly.

“Who says we’re giving up?” Tony shot back, folding his arms to match Steve.

“We are if we’re not taking responsibility for our actions,” Steve answered. “This document just shifts the blame.”

Tony opened his mouth to respond, but Rhodey beat him to it.

“I’m sorry, Steve, but that...” Rhodey shook his head, his features grave. “That is dangerously arrogant. This is the *United Nations* we’re talking about. It’s not the World Security Council, it’s not S.H.I.E.L.D., it’s not even HYDRA-”

"I'm glad you brought HYDRA up," Steve interrupted, "because I've been meaning to mention it. You guys do realise, right, that if we sign these accords we're probably going to have to come clean about Peter?" He hesitated for a moment to make eye contact with the kid, and Tony's sudden anger was diluted somewhat when he saw that Steve did, at least, have the decency to cast Peter a non-verbal look of apology.

"I know this is probably going to piss you off, Tony," he continued. "I'm not even sure if I should go there, to be honest."

"No, keep going," Tony shot back, "you don't wanna ruin your streak of pissing me off now, it's been unbroken for oh, I'd say four years? The whole time I've known you, maybe?"

Steve glared at him, but refrained from commenting on this. "I'm just trying to be realistic," he said, with an air of forced calm. "The UN is run by people, and people have agendas. One way or another, I can guarantee that these Accords won't allow for secrecy, in any way shape or form. That includes hiding Peter from the world. And I'm sorry to have to say this, Pete, but having the whole world know that you're living with us probably will do more harm than good. It would attract HYDRA's attention, which would endanger you further."

"And they won't stop," Bucky spoke up quietly, from his place next to Steve. "Once they know where you are, they'll find a way to get to you. Always. It's what they're best at."

"Okay, can we drop the HYDRA issue for now?" Tony interjected tersely, with a worried glance at Peter. He was all too aware that this conversation would probably trigger the kid big-time, but Peter seemed to be taking the discussion surprisingly well; in fact, the solemn look of morose resignation Peter's face seemed to indicate that he'd already considered this possibility, perhaps even agreed with Steve and Bucky. Tony had a bad feeling that the kid was probably blaming himself for being a hindrance to the team, which only added to his unease - did he sense *another* guilt complex had taken residence at the Tower? Lord knew that Tony already provided enough of that himself - but he would have to discuss that with Peter later, when they were alone. Right now, he had other issues to be dealing with.

There were a lot of things he wanted to say to Steve, particularly involving the fact that HYDRA was already more than aware of Peter's location - why else would they have sent two agents to the Tower to capture the kid again? - but he had the sense that it probably wasn't smart to bring that up in front of Peter himself. Any mention of the word HYDRA usually sent the kid into hyperventilation mode, and Tony would rather not be the cause of one of Peter's panic attacks.

"Cap, when I realised what my weapons were capable of in the wrong hands, I shut it down," Tony said instead, choosing to address the HYDRA-elephant at a later time. "I stopped manufacturing, I understood that they were doing more harm than good. It's the same as what Vision was saying earlier - ever since the Avengers were formed, the number of world-threatening events has increased. Sometimes, the harder you try to do the right thing, the more problems you end up facing."

"Like when we designed Ultron," Bruce put in, a guilty note in his voice.

Tony winced at that, but nodded, because it certainly helped his case. "Exactly."

"This is completely different," Steve argued back. "You chose to stop manufacturing your weapons, Tony. If we sign these Accords, we surrender our right to choose. What if this panel sends us somewhere we don't think we should go? What if there's somewhere we *need* to go, and they don't let us?" He paused, looking Tony directly in the eye. "We may not be perfect, but the safest hands are still our own."

Tony sighed, letting out a frustrated breath through his teeth.

“If we don’t do this now,” he said, slowly and deliberately so that it would get through even the most fossilised of skulls in the room, “it’s gonna be done to us later. That’s a fact. That won’t be pretty.”

“And what exactly does *not-pretty* entail, Stark?” Thor spoke up, leaning against the doorway of the room.

Tony shrugged matter-of-factly. “At best, legal intervention. At worst...well, let’s just say we’re gonna be one big happy jailbird family.”

“You’re saying they’ll come for us,” Wanda realised.

“He is,” Vision agreed. “And he’s right.”

Great. So far, Tony’s team consisted of Rhodey and a superbomb. He was just about to launch another persuasion attack when Natasha did something that completely caught Tony off guard.

“Maybe he is,” she said slowly, choosing each word with precision. “If we have one hand on the wheel, we can still steer. If we take it off...”

“Nat, aren’t you the same woman who told the government to kiss her ass a few years ago?” Sam interrupted pointedly.

Natasha shot him a glare. “I’m just reading the terrain, Sam. We have made...some very public mistakes. We need to win their trust back.”

Tony was in shock. He didn’t think this day would ever come to pass in his life.

“I’m sorry,” he said incredulously. “Did I just mishear you, Nat, or did you agree with me?”

“I think she did,” Bruce supplied, a small grin on his lips. “That’s what the scientist heard, anyway.”

“Oh, I wanna take it back now,” Natasha groaned.

“No no *no*, you can’t retract it,” Tony said, with a wag of his finger. “In fact, I’m officially proclaiming Peter as my witness to the event. Kid, put that photographic memory of yours to good use, will you?”

Peter looked up, eyes twinkling brightly. “Already done, Tony,” he said, a cheeky smile playing on his lips. “Nat, I’m sorry, but you’re never gonna forget this day.”

“Okay,” Tony said, with a clap of his hands. “It’s official. Case closed. I win.”

“I have to go,” Steve broke in suddenly.

Tony glanced over at the man. He was staring down at his phone, a sudden look of pale horror flooding through his features. Before Tony or any of the Avengers could ask what the problem was, Steve was on his feet and hurriedly exiting the room.

There was a beat in which Tony could tell that the rest of the team’s thoughts perfectly mirrored his own: *what the fuck was that about?* (Although, to be fair, some of them probably put it a lot more eloquently than he did.) It was Thor who finally broke the nonplussed silence.

"I'm hungry," he announced proudly as though this was a feeling that only Gods of Thunder could experience. "I am officially making an executive decision. We will have dinner early."

"I'll agree to that," Sam nodded. "We've all had a long day, I think we need to put our minds at ease. Pete, you wanna learn how to make tacos? It's on tonight's menu."

"Say yes, kid," Tony said immediately. "Don't follow in my footsteps and grow up not knowing how to cook anything. You'll end up with type 2 diabetes."

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Birds were a pain in Peter's ass. They were so loud, making their godforsaken noises at ungodly hours of the morning. He didn't even understand what they were *doing* while swooping around the top floor of the Tower - shouldn't they be in a tree somewhere, interrupting someone else's sleep?

"Ugh," Peter groaned, rolling over and pressing down on his eyes. The dull ache was uncomfortable, and enough to turn him from an unresponsive sponge to an almost alert potato.

"Rough night?" a voice came from his left. Normally, Peter would have been up and fighting in an instant at the sound of somebody in his room without his permission. But it had, in fact, been a rough night, and the person speaking knew that - he'd spent three hours reading *The Goblet of Fire* to Peter, after all.

"I'm just not sure if my body can handle anymore of this 'getting out of bed' nonsense, Tony."

"Join the club, kid, but you need to get up. We have errands to run and civilians to befuddle."

"I have so many questions."

"I need to get out of the Tower because I'm about one stupid comment away from punching a wall, and you need to get out of the Tower because, well, you haven't really been outside since we took you in. Henceforth, errands and befuddled civilians!" Tony grinned, failing to mention Peter's nighttime stint in an alleyway not a day after he'd helped the man with his HYDRA-shaped problem.

"Ok... but what's an errand?"

"Oh, right, an errand," the billionaire said awkwardly, his exuberant mood momentarily felled by Peter's lack of knowledge about the outside world. Peter winced - just when he thought he was starting to fit in with the world he'd been catapulted into, he was reminded of his complete and utter inexperience in it. Oh, what he wouldn't give to be *normal*. "An errand is a, er, thing."

"Eloquent as always, Tony."

"Shut it, Pete. An errand is when you go outside to do stuff. Productive stuff. Ugh, this is not going well, hang on. I'm going to get FRIDAY to explain it."

FRIDAY, being the ever-listening and intelligent AI that she was, took that as her cue to spout off the definition of an errand. "It is a short journey undertaken in order to deliver or collect something."

"Thanks, FRI. You get me now, Pete?"

"So it's like... a mission?" Peter frowned.

"Sure, sort of, though this mission may not be the kind you're used to."

"Why?"

“We’re going Christmas present shopping, and before you ask, Christmas is a holiday on the 25th of December, where you eat a shit-ton of food and buy gifts for the people you like.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely not the kind of mission I’m used to,” Peter said, half-jokingly, though he was sure Tony had picked up on the quavering of his voice and the light sheen of sweat that had gathered on his forehead at the mere thought of the missions *he* was familiar with.

*BloodFireExplosionsTraitor* . No.

With great effort, Peter pushed the memories from his brain and focused on the new information Tony had given him. Pepper had also explained Christmas to him while they’d put up decorations in the living room and adorned the tree with baubles and tinsel. Her explanation had involved more stories of Tony’s wild Christmas parties of the past and her own memories of the celebration as a child than the actual logistics.

“Well, I’ll let you get changed,” Tony decided. “Meet me in the kitchen when you’re ready and we’ll head down together. Sam’s still asleep so breakfast hasn’t been made, but we can pick up something on the way to the mall. I know a fantastic muffin place,” he added, expertly brushing past the blatant reminder of Peter’s unconventional upbringing and focusing on something else (food, as usual).

“Yep.”

Ten minutes later, Peter was showered and had chosen a pair of jeans, Converse and a T-shirt reading ‘the physics is theoretical but the fun is real’. Somehow, he’d developed his own personal style in his time free of the skin-tight black suit or plain white T-shirt and grey track pants that HYDRA had provided him with. That style consisted of denim jeans in varying colours, sneakers and science T-shirts labelled with terrible puns, occasionally interspersed with a hoodie here or there.

In the kitchen, Tony took one look at him and sighed, the sadness in his eyes evident. Peter froze - had he done something wrong? Did he forget something?

“Pete, it’s three degrees out there - you’re going to need more than jeans and a T-shirt.”

It was then that Peter noticed Tony was swaddled up in a sweater and jacket, as well as a hideous orange-and-green-striped beanie adorned with an obnoxious pom pom.

“Oh, right, yeah. I knew that. I was just... showing you my t-shirt before I covered it up,” Peter said awkwardly as blood rushed to his face, before edging out of the room and running back to his bedroom.

He was such a dumbass. *Of course* he’d need more clothes in the middle of *fucking* winter in New York. He dug through his wardrobe, finding a blue hoodie he liked and tugging it on before continuing his search for a jacket.

There was a soft knock at his door, and Peter cursed under his breath. “I’ll be out in a sec, I’m just trying to find a-” he paused while he frantically pulled at the sleeve of a black windbreaker “-jacket.”

The door creaked open and Tony’s face poked into the gap. “Kid, it’s okay that you didn’t know to bring a couple more layers. You haven’t been outside in at least a month, and I always keep the Tower at a comfortable temperature.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m just getting a jacket,” Peter muttered tensely as he continued to pull on the sleeve of the jacket, becoming more and more flustered as he did so. Apparently his super-

strength was no match for a stubborn jacket stuck on its clothes hanger.

“Hey, hey, calm down before you rip that poor jacket in half. It’s *okay*, kid,” Tony said, his voice gentle and his hands outstretched soothingly as he approached slowly.

Suddenly, Peter snapped. Anger flared in his stomach and heat rushed to his face, though this time it was not from embarrassment. “*Stop saying that!* It’s *not* okay! *Nothing* about this situation is okay! I don’t know what’s happening half the time because stupid, *fucking* HYDRA stole me away from my parents and raised me to be a freaking *assassin*. I don’t even know if that’s what actually happened, maybe my parents *fucking* sold me to HYDRA like an object! Am I that undesirable that even my own parents were willing to give me away? I don’t know anything and all you can say is ‘it’s okay’? It’s not! I’m not...” Peter’s voice broke, a sob bubbling up his throat and stealing his breath. He sunk to the floor, arms wrapping around his knees as another sob made his chest constrict painfully. “If I don’t belong here and I don’t belong at HYDRA, then I don’t know where I’m supposed to be!”

“I do.”

Tony’s voice was so quiet that Peter wasn’t certain he hadn’t imagined it. “What?”

“I know where you belong, Peter. It’s wherever *you* want to be, because you’re your own person. HYDRA doesn’t own you, no matter how they may have gotten their claws into you in the first place, and I’m going to read between the lines and say you don’t want to go back to them. We don’t own you either, and you’re free to go wherever you want to go. If you want to go back to the streets, go for it, I swear I won’t stop you. Just know that you’ll be getting frequent check-ins from every single one of the Avengers because we - we really care about you, Pete. That’s saying something too, because collectively we have more trust issues than a piece of pumice has holes. We want you to stay here, but if that’s not what you want then we will do everything we can to help you get where you feel comfortable. Just so you know, I think you fit in perfectly here,” Tony finished, approaching Peter and wrapping him in a tight hug. Peter sank into the embrace, breathing deeply.

He only felt out of place when he was reminded of his past or something it had deprived him of, which happened a lot - it was not something he could escape. On the other hand, those instances were slowly becoming less frequent, and in between those moments he felt more comfortable than he ever had in his life.

“I - I like it here, and I don’t mean to sound ungrateful,” Peter admitted in a small voice. “I’m just sick of being different all the time, of feeling like I don’t belong somewhere I *want* to belong to, so badly.”

“I think being different is what makes you so great, kiddo. I mean, look around you - you’re living in Avengers Tower with the Avengers, all of whom have their quirks and oddities. No one here is normal, nothing about this situation is normal, but *that is okay*. You’ve been through hell, but you’re safe now. Eventually you’ll reach some degree of normality and in the meantime, you can just learn what it’s like to not have to be constantly worrying about survival.”

“Well, the thing about going through hell is that it makes you fireproof,” Peter said with a small smile.

“Huh, I guess you’re right, kid. Are you ready to go now?” Tony asked as he held up the windbreaker. Peter nodded and slipped into the jacket, allowing Tony to fuss around with it for a little while before gently batting his hands away. “One more thing...” Tony said, as he searched through Peter’s drawers. “Aha! Victorious!” The billionaire turned around triumphantly, holding a

beanie that matched the ugliness of his own.

“No, no way am I wearing that thing,” Peter said, eyeing the monstrosity wearily. It had blocky, grey-blue polka dots on a dull red fabric, with an explosion of faux-fur on the top that could possibly have passed as a pom pom in 1934. However, it being almost 2016, the thing looked more like a long-dead rat than anything else.

Peter allowed Tony to pull it onto his head with reluctance, but soon he was thankful for the extra warmth it provided. They’d taken the private elevator down into the near deserted lobby, save for the singular receptionist on duty, and as soon as Peter had stepped through the doors he’d felt the chill bite into his cheeks. Snow lined the sides of the roads while slush dominated the footpaths, having been trampled into oblivion by the millions of feet walking over it 24/7. The air was cold, oh so very cold, but it was fresher than anything he’d breathed in a very long time. The Tower may have had high quality air filtration systems, but sharing breathing room with other people for extended periods of time got very old, very fast.

They started down the street, Tony leading, and an advantage of the cold weather soon made itself apparent. The streets, though nowhere near deserted, were not as packed as they usually were. On top of that, those who had decided to face the cold had their heads tucked low into their collars, which meant that Tony - who typically had a very recognisable face - was able to travel freely through the city without interruption.

They stopped at the muffin stall that the genius had been gunning for, and Peter tried a raspberry and white chocolate one for the first time. It had been heavenly, and he made a mental note to ask Sam to either make them himself or teach Peter how to do so.

Once they’d consumed their breakfasts, they set off to the mall. Peter had never been inside one of them before, but he’d seen the exteriors during his exploits as a homeless teenager. Tony warned him that they were usually chaotic, stuffy places, filled to the brim with over-priced items for sale and tired people. Especially around Christmas time.

“So why don’t we just order presents online?” Peter asked.

“It’s part of the *magic*, Pete. Browsing through the aisles looking for the perfect gift, paying the inflated price, the awkward interaction with the cashier - it’s all part of the joyous Christmas spirit. Besides, no one’s expecting to see Tony Stark at a shopping mall and they’re all focused on their own things, which means we probably won’t have to make a dash for the bathrooms to escape the paps.”

“Right...” Peter still didn’t get how dealing with tired people and risking being chased by the media added to the Christmas spirit, but he wasn’t going to complain. He was just glad to be out of the Tower.

Ten minutes later, they’d entered the mall. The heated air hit them as soon as they stepped through the sliding doors, and Peter shivered involuntarily at the sudden temperature change. They strolled down the corridor, skipping past the fast food venues - the fact that they were even open this early in the morning spoke volumes about the society they lived in - who wanted a burger not even half an hour after the sun breached the horizon? - and shady stores that lined the first few hundred meters in all their tourist-trapping glory.

“Alright, kiddo, we need presents for every Avenger, plus Pepper. Any ideas?”

“Prank kits for Clint and Sam?”

“Absolutely not,” Tony said flatly.

“Oh, why?”

“A few years back, every single person got those two a prank kit. The next three months were absolutely hell for everyone, until Natasha found where they’d stashed them and burned them. Now, we aren’t allowed to buy prank kits at all, lest those two get their hands on them.”

“That sounds terrifying.”

“Oh it was. I still have nightmares about it,” Tony shuddered jokingly. Peter sobered instantly at the mention of nightmares, his mind flashing with his own that plagued him nightly. How Tony could bring up the subject of nightmares so casually, he had no idea. “But, I saw this hoodie thing that doubles as a blanket that I reckon Clint will love. The man loves to make nests, but then yells at us when we compare him to a bird.”

“Sam mentioned something about a weird thing for the kitchen,” Peter said, thankful for the topic change.

“Yeah, do you remember what it’s called?”

“An Anova Culinary Sous Vide Precision Cooker.”

Tony snorted violently. “Your memory is freakishly good, Pete. What the heck is an Anova Culinary Sous Vide Precision Cooker?”

“I don’t know, I guess we’ll find out.”

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They’d wandered the mall for hours, and had almost gotten everything they needed. They’d found a bright purple blanket-but-also-hoodie thing for Clint, and Peter had needed to restrain himself from asking for one himself - they were just so big and fluffy. Tony must have seen the longing in his eyes as he looked at the pile though, because he grabbed a second one and added it to the cart without a word.

Sam’s weird kitchen appliance turned out to be a device he could use to heat water to the exact temperature he wanted without having to physically be in the kitchen while it happened. Peter, however, was more interested in the knives - he didn’t understand why stores sold weapons of such high quality for the sole use of cutting up food. When he asked Tony, the man had to sit down for several minutes because he was laughing too hard to stand. “You remind me of Nat,” he said, shaking his head.

They went to a jewelry store next, so that Tony could get a necklace for Pepper. The entire place had reminded Peter of the time he’d robbed a Swarovski store to get a very specific type of diamond that the scientists at HYDRA needed for their newest invention. Though that was one of his more tame missions, Tony had seemed shocked that he’d robbed a jewelry store. “Do you know how hard it is to do that, Pete?”

“Yeah, cause I’ve done it. The laser alarm was tricky to get past, but having super agility really helped out.”

Peter dragged Tony into a magic store so they could find a beginner’s kit for Bruce. The man had mentioned wanting to learn a few tricks, though Tony had been very reluctant to even set foot in the shop. “Magic doesn’t exist. It’s just science that hasn’t been explained yet! Frankly, I’m a little offended that my science bro would betray me like this.”

“Stop complaining, Tony, this isn’t about you. Magic totally does exist - have you not been paying attention during our *Harry Potter* sessions?”

Soon though, Peter regretted berating Tony for being reluctant to go into the magic store, as not five minutes later, their positions were reversed. “No, no, Tony I don’t want to go in there!”

“Why not?”

“It’s a tourist shop!”

“So?”

“I have the internet, I know they’re notorious for high prices, scams and just general dodginess.”

“I think the internet has severely misjudged the terribleness of tourist shops. Have you actually been in one?”

“Well, no, but-”

“Then hush, child. Come on.”

The tourist shop hadn’t been that bad, not that Peter would ever tell Tony he’d been right. They’d gotten a set of American pencils for Steve - one was patterned with tiny American stars, another seemed to resemble Donald Trump, while yet another just had ‘PATRIOTISM’ printed vertically across it in obnoxious red letters. They also bought a drawing pad from an art store, and Peter found a sheet of American stickers that they could stick on the front cover.

Thor’s gift was easy - all they had to do was buy the god a ridiculously oversized crate of pop-tarts. Tony had pre-arranged that gift with the manager of Walmart, so all they needed to do was swing by and pick it up. There were so many boxes stacked in the crate, filled with so many flavours, that Peter felt a little sick looking at them all. He was sure they’d disappear at the speed of light once Thor set his eyes (and stomach) upon them.

Once they’d turned away from the manager’s questioning - and slightly concerned - gaze, they went to what Tony called a ‘hippie shop’ for Natasha. Peter didn’t know what a hippie was, but the store they went into was... weird. There were at least thirty scented candles burning at once and Peter was sure that broke some kind of fire code. Not to mention the smell was so overpowering that he had to leave the shop about five minutes after he’d entered because it just became too much for his enhanced sense of smell. The lighting was warm and dim, and there were several tapestries hanging from the walls and ceiling. When Tony walked out though, he was holding a pack of sticks and a pouch filled with crystals.

“What are those?” Peter asked, confusion clear on his face.

“These are cinnamon scented incense sticks and a ton of crystals. They’re meant to have, like, healing properties or some other voodoo shit. Nat likes them for her yoga.”

“Tony,” Peter said as they munched on cookies from a bakery. “Vision has code in him, right?”

“Yeah? I’m not sure where you’re going with this, Pete.”

“So, if he learnt how to code, would he be able to, like, change himself?”

“Theoretically, I suppose? I’m not sure if it would actually work though.”

“So, we could say, get him a *Coding For Dummies* book?”

Tony burst out laughing. “Kid, you’re a crack up. But also kind of a genius. I was just going to get Vision some paprika or something - that’s way better though.”

The bookstore attendant was very confused as to why Tony Stark was buying a *Coding for Dummies* book.

They struggled on what to buy Wanda, before Peter remembered her obsession with *The Sims 4* , and so they bought her a one hundred dollar Stark voucher so she could upload the money to her device and buy whatever she wanted on the game. Peter also managed to find a t-shirt that said ‘Bitch, I’ve made sims prettier than you’, and Tony almost bought one for himself as well.

The last person on their list was Rhodey, and Tony made a beeline for Target. Apparently, Rhodey had a strange infatuation with the store, and would automatically love anything from there. They browsed the video game section, and Tony bought seven different airplane games for the Air Force Officer - Rhodey enjoyed beating everyone when they went up against him in those kinds of games. Meanwhile, Peter found a game called *Goat Simulator* , and as far as he could tell, the main objective was to run around as a goat and wreak havoc. It sounded fun.

Once they’d purchased the huge amount of airplane video games, Tony became suddenly shift in his demeanour.

“Kid, I need to go... to the bathroom. Yep, bathroom. Have this and go buy yourself that goat game you were eyeballing, or something else. I don’t know, you choose. Freedom and all that,” the billionaire said, shoving a fifty dollar note at Peter before jogging off... in the complete opposite direction of the bathroom.

“Tony, the bathroom is that way,” Peter said, pointing in the actual direction of the bathroom.

“Yeah, but I, uh, I don’t like that bathroom.”

“You don’t like that bathroom?”

“Yes, uh, no. Stop it. Stop. Don’t look at me like that. I’m going now,” Tony said hurriedly.

That was suspicious enough on its own, and so Peter listened to his gut and followed Tony. Sure enough, the man was not anywhere near a bathroom. Instead, he had stopped outside a shop dedicated entirely to Star Wars merchandise. There was only one person in the Tower that liked Star Wars enough to warrant a gift based off it, and that person was himself. If Peter was right, Tony was buying a gift for him, which meant Peter now had a very limited amount of time to do the same.

After five minutes of brainstorming, Peter had come up with the perfect idea and was currently dashing through the crowds of people in order to implement it.

Peter knew that Tony loved to be loved above all else. It wasn’t a self-centred thing, the man had been starved of affection for most of his childhood, and was still learning how to return the emotion. It was part of the reason he became Iron Man, so that he could do something worthy of praise, worthy of love. Before Iron Man, Tony didn’t believe he deserved anything he had. Now, he was still struggling with that idea, and so Peter was going to make it easier for him.

He pulled out his phone (courtesy of Mr Stark) and went onto the camera app. Then, he started his task.

“What do you like about Iron Man?”

He asked the same question, over and over to at least twenty people and each time he got a different answer.

“He’s a hero. Saved my daughter and I during the battle of New York. She’s going off to Harvard next year, and that wouldn’t be possible without him.”

“I like how he turned his life around. Stark went from being a manufacturer of weapons of mass destruction to a superhero, can’t get more drastic than that.”

“He’s funny. All those snarky remarks. What a legend.”

“I don’t really like Iron Man, but Tony Stark, I respect. He’s a genius - I want to be like him some day.”

“Iron Man saved my daddy! He’s a policeman and he had to go to the hospital with a broken arm, but he said it would be worse if Iron Man wasn’t there.”

“He’s strong. The guy’s been through a lot of shit, but he’s still here. He’s still fighting.”

On and on the praise went, until Peter had enough footage for at least a five minute video. Grinning, he closed his phone and dashed back to Target, where he and Tony had agreed to rendezvous. He’d need to ask Rhodey if he could borrow his laptop to compile the videos and add in some text, but other than that he had Tony’s Christmas present sorted.

When he reached Target, he saw that the billionaire hadn’t arrived yet, so he hurried back inside to buy *Goat Simulator* so the man wouldn’t get suspicious. By the time he returned to the meet point, Tony had arrived.

“Hey, kid.”

“Hey, Tony. Find that bathroom you were looking for?”

“Yep, all good on this end. What about you?” Tony asked. Peter just held up the disc in response.

“Cool, cool. Want to get lunch?”

“Yes please, I’m starving.”

“Alright, kiddo, let’s go. I know this great cafe,” Tony said, looping his arm around Peter’s shoulders.

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“Ugh, I can’t feel my feet,” Peter groaned as he flopped down onto the hard plastic chair of the cafe they’d stopped at for a late lunch. The bags he was carrying scattered around him, the multicoloured plastic crinkling loudly.

“Don’t be dramatic. We’ve only been at it for a few hours.”

“Really, Tony? Really? *You’re* telling *me* not to be dramatic?”

“Point taken, but it hasn’t really been that long.”

“It’s been six hours. *Six*. Though, I have stood up for two days straight before. There’s just something so draining about shopping with a perfectionist.”

“Hey! I’m not...” Tony trailed off, glancing at Peter in shock. “Wait, you’ve had to stand up for forty-eight hours straight?”

“Mission requirements,” Peter answered with a shrug. “But yes, you are a perfectionist. It’s been six hours and we’ve only just managed to buy everything we need.”

“That’s not my fault. They need to be...”

“What, perfect?” Peter said smugly.

“Okay, kid, you win this round,” Tony griped, shooting a glare at Peter, but the boy wasn’t looking at him. He was rubbing the back of his neck harshly and staring into the crowd of shoppers passing by the storefront hurriedly.

His head had been throbbing since hour three, but Peter figured it was the early morning, boredom, or physical tiredness - possibly a combination of all three. Now, however, the pain had reached its climax, culminating at the base of his skull as it spiked painfully. He winced, recognising the sensation as his odd sixth sense. When the danger was not in the form of an immediate threat, but rather a coming-soon-but-not-yet-here type of thing, he was alerted in the form of a painful headache. The problem with this method was that Peter didn’t usually realise the headache was a result of his sixth sense until it was too late.

Right now, all Peter knew was that they were being watched, but he didn’t know by whom. What if HYDRA was here, planning to re-capture him while he was away from the rest of the Avengers? Tony may be an experienced fighter, but the man didn’t have his suit, just his wrist gauntlet, which meant that he wouldn’t be able to defend himself as effectively. Whoever it was, they posed a threat to his person, and so he had to find them.

He expanded his senses, eyes having failed to find the threat, until he heard it - a strange clicking that didn’t belong amongst the sea of chatter and grinding of coffee machines. His eyes zeroed in on the threat, which he’d managed to find with the help of his hearing; it was a man with a thick, brown afro and a pair of stylish Ray Bans, holding a camera - that explained the clicking. It wasn’t the typical uniform that Peter was used to, but HYDRA had been known to dress some of their agents in civilian clothes for certain missions. Peter’s body shifted without him thinking about it, falling into the familiar stance that exuded stealth and a quiet power. His mind slipped into mission mode, with a single objective, no distractions.

“Peter! What are you doing?”

Except maybe that one. Tony’s specialty was distracting him, and while that was usually a good thing, it was not now. “Someone’s watching us, Tony. I don’t know who they are.”

Tony stiffened instantly, his finger hovering over the button that activated the gauntlet.

“HYDRA?”

“I don’t know, maybe.”

“Where?” Tony asked under his breath and Peter nodded subtly in the direction of the afro-man.

The billionaire followed his gaze, but surprisingly he did not stiffen further at the sight of the other man. Rather, his frame relaxed and he let out an amused huff. “Pete, relax, bud. That’s not a HYDRA agent.”

“How do you know? They have a whole division that specialises in blending in.”

“Because that’s Jordan Krammer - he’s a journalist for *Us Weekly* and his favourite topic to write about is yours truly.”

“So, he doesn’t work for HYDRA?”

“He’s pretty scummy, but I don’t think he’d sink that low.”

“Not everyone that works for HYDRA does it voluntarily. They’re master manipulators.”

“I know, kid, but I’m pretty sure Krammer is just looking for his next scoop. I’m actually surprised

we managed to last this long without being spotted by him or one of his minions,” Tony said soothingly. “Wait here, I’ll go deal with him.”

Peter tensed while the billionaire stalked over to Krammer, ready to sprint across the room at the slightest hint of aggression from the ‘journalist’. However, his interference wasn’t needed as not ten minutes later, Tony came strolling back to him, looking frustrated but otherwise unruffled.

“Stop looking at me like I’m about to drop dead, kid,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “I’m fine, just annoyed. I may be a pro at dealing with paps, but that doesn’t mean I like it.”

“Is he going to write an article about you?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time, but I don’t think so. I wiped his camera, but they have so many tricks up their sleeves, I wouldn’t exactly be surprised if there was a front-page story tomorrow about my Christmas shopping.”

“Oh.”

“You ready to go home now, kid?”

“*God yes.*”

“Alright, let’s head off then,” Tony said with a chuckle. They stood up, gathered their bags, and trudged back into the cold air of the early afternoon.

The walk back to the Tower was short, quiet and uneventful. Peter was still trying to calm himself down from the scare with Krammer. His heart pounded in his chest, the strong pulse echoing painfully in his ears, and his palms were sweaty as he twisted them. The HYDRA operative words rang in his ears, something that seemed to be happening more and more frequently ever since the event - “*We’re coming. You belong with us*”. Those words were the soundtrack to his nightmares and his constant companions during the day, weaving in and out of his mind at the most inconvenient of times.

He didn’t want to belong with HYDRA, didn’t want to go near them with a twelve foot pole, but what if he had no choice? What if they came for him while he was alone, or worse, with the Avengers? Not even the group of renowned superheroes would be able to stand up against the full might of HYDRA. The organisation had the ability to take everything from Peter, and then steal him away from the world once more.

He’d slipped so easily back into his old self - a focused machine with a one-track mind and deadly skills - and it scared him. He knew that being normal was not something he’d ever fully achieve, but each reminder of his oddities and past just made it harder to try and tackle the huge task of adjusting to this new world of freedom and safety.

“*We’re coming. You belong with us .*”

“Kid, we’re back,” Tony said, his voice jerking Peter out of his troubling thoughts. They’d walked all the way to the Tower, through the lobby, into the elevator and up to the living room without Peter noticing.

“Oh.”

“Do you want to take the presents to your room?” Tony suggested. “Every single member of the

team is nosy to some degree, but none of them will go into your space without permission, which makes it the best hiding place.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Are-you okay, Peter?” Tony asked hesitantly, giving him a sideways glance.

“Yeah, yep,” Peter replied hurriedly. “Fine. Great.”

“Uh-huh. You know, for an ex-HYDRA assassin, you’re pretty sucky at lying.”

That wasn’t true. Peter was usually fantastic at lying, but he was a bit preoccupied with the fact that his brain wouldn’t *fucking shut up* .

*“We’re coming”*

*“You belong with us”*

*BloodFireExplosionsTraitor*

*Thousands of voices screaming as the building collapsed in front of him, thousands of lives decimated in an instant.*

*A boy, blood covered, lunging at him, begging for help, begging.*

“*Shut up!*” Peter snapped as his hands rose to his pounding skull. His fingers curled in his hair, pulling at the strands as his nails scratched at his scalp. “Please, just shut up,” he sobbed. The voices quieted, but did not cease. They were there, whispering in the back of his mind.

“Peter? Hey, hey, buddy. Come on, what’s wrong?” Tony’s voice sounded all *wrong* - too far away and distant, like there was an invisible wall between them.

“They won’t stop!”

“What? What won’t stop, kiddo?”

“The *voices* , the *memories* !”

“Oh - *oh* , kid. I get it, don’t worry we can fix this,” Tony said as he untangled Peter’s hands from his hair, grabbing one of them in his own and scooping the bags up in the other.

Peter let himself be led to his room, where Tony put the bags in a corner and then eased him down onto the bed, drawing the blinds as he went. Almost instantly, Peter’s headache calmed in the dimness. He sighed in relief, scrubbing a hand over his face and sinking into the pillow.

“What you need right now is a distraction. It’s what I do when the bad memories come and won’t go away.”

“It happens to you too?”

“Of course, Pete. You can’t go into this line of work and *not* have flashbacks, everyone here experiences them which means we’re all certified experts in dealing with them. It’s - it’s actually a symptom of PTSD, and I hate to say that I wouldn’t be surprised if you have it, considering what you’ve been through.”

“PTSD...” Peter said, rolling the name around on his tongue. He knew what it was, of course, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but he’d never thought of the possibility that he could have it. He’d genuinely just thought that he was bat-shit crazy.

“Yeah, but there are ways to deal with this stuff. Everyone’s method is different - I can show you mine and if that doesn’t work for you we can ask someone else, okay?”

“Uh, ok.”

“First off, we need music, not too loud, otherwise it’ll overwhelm you, but just background noise. Something you can listen to instead of the voices. FRI, play some - ugh - Queen, please,” Tony said, slightly reluctantly, and then *I Want To Break Free* was flowing softly through the speakers. The irony was not lost on either of them.

Once the music started, the voices hushed even further. Tony pulled out a fifty thousand piece puzzle of the world from somewhere and they set to work on it. The complicated work allowed Peter to concentrate on something other than the tangled mess of his mind, and before he knew it they were starting another puzzle.

He fell asleep on the floor, barely registering it as the carpet smooshed against his cheek and itched uncomfortably. Having a mental breakdown and then completing two puzzles consisting of over one hundred thousand pieces collectively seemed to really tire one out.

For the first time in weeks, he slept through the night. Maybe he subconsciously knew what was coming the next evening, and his body was allowing him a moment of rest.

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Stark Seen Shopping With Unknown Boy

“This story has made a splash all over the country. Written by Jordan Krammer of Us Weekly , it depicts a boy of around fifteen - whose identity we do not know as of yet - sitting in a cafe next to Tony Stark himself.

Stark, known for his exploits as Iron Man and his eccentric, spur-of-the-moment decisions, has been spotted several times before at a Manhattan Mall during the Christmas period. It is a well-discussed fact that Stark likes to go Christmas shopping, instead of ordering online, with Stark himself weighing in on the topic a few times, but never before has he had a companion with him. This companion is not one we have seen before in any of Stark’s numerous public appearances. As he is most likely a minor, this boy’s records are sealed, so we can do nothing but speculate. Could this boy be a relative, possibly even a long-lost son? Or maybe he is a new addition to the infamous Avengers team. If so, we must begin to question Stark’s morality at recruiting someone so young-”

The television switched off. A furious Tony was holding the remote and glaring at the device like it had personally wronged him. “Don’t watch that shit, Peter,” he growled.

“I - sorry,” Peter stuttered. He’d just switched on the TV while he made himself a bowl of pasta for an afternoon snack, but ended up abandoning that pursuit when the news anchors started talking about *him* . He’d already been dubbed the ‘Mystery Kid’.

Tony’s demeanour softened at the sound of Peter’s worried voice. “No, I’m sorry Peter, this isn’t your fault. I just feel stupid. I didn’t even think that the article Krammer wrote might not be just about me, and now it’ll be even easier for HYDRA to find you and the UN certainly won’t trust me

to make important decisions about the Accords while my morality is in question. Ugh, I need to get this under control, where's Pepper?" Tony said, his mouth moving at a rapid speed as his train of thought jumped from one topic to another. The man ran out of the room, probably looking for Pepper, and Peter was left to his own thoughts.

He wasn't worried about it being easier for HYDRA to find him - they already knew exactly where he was. He was more stressed about the new difficulties he'd created for Tony and the rest of the Avengers when it came to the Accords. What if *he* was the reason they were turned into servants for the government?

Whatever happened in the future, he had an issue that was a tad more immediate.

The world now knew he existed.

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"So he's out there. There's a picture of him circulating around the interwebs, Pep. A picture of him with *me*."

Tony's words were coming out muffled by his own hands, which were pressed against his face in an attempt to alleviate some of the stress that was radiating out of him in tangible waves.

"We can sort it out," came Pepper's voice from above him, soothing and calm and ever-collected. "I'll call up Krammer, bribe him with some money or maybe the threat of a lawsuit, and he'll take the article down."

"It's too late," Tony moaned, burying his face deeper into his hands and agitatedly grabbing fistfuls of his skin. "It's already spread, it's on TV now, everyone's gonna see it which is just *perfect*, by the way, now that we're on the radars of 117 countries with this Accords shit-"

"Tony, calm down," Pepper cut in, reaching out and gently squeezing his shoulder. "There's still time to figure this out-"

"You know what the real issue is here?" Tony interrupted, raising his head out of his hands in agitation. "It's that it's *my fucking fault*. I keep doing this, I keep on trying to fix things for Peter but end up making everything ten times worse - I mean, what was I thinking? We were gonna go out together, play happy families, and no one whatsoever was gonna notice us? Everything was going to be A-OK, because everything's always A-OK because nothing bad ever happens at all to Tony Stark, oh no, that would be ridiculous! Well that turned out fantastic, didn't it, now there's a picture of Peter and me all over the internet and there's *no way* HYDRA's gonna miss it-"

"*Tony*. Listen to me," Pepper interjected, her voice firm and demanding, and the determination in her voice was so apparent that Tony abruptly stopped talking, closing his jaw immediately. "Yes, we've got a bit of a problem on our hands-"

*A bit!?* Tony felt like shrieking at her. He barely managed to suppress that particular urge, instead running his shaking hands over his face to try and calm down.

"-but it hasn't turned into complete chaos yet, and we can still keep it that way. We've dealt with



worse than this before - you're the one who publicly announced you were shutting down the entire point of our company seven years ago, remember that?"

In another situation, Tony would have laughed. Right now, however, he was far too riled up to find anything remotely humorous at all; he settled instead for a tense, mirthless nod.

"Here's what we're going to do," Pepper continued steadily. "We're going to first call Krammer and get the original article deleted. We can't erase any copies of it, but it'll still ease the media's accessibility to the picture somewhat. Then, you're going to call an emergency meeting with the team and put the Tower into lockdown mode. It will probably amount to nothing, but as you said, HYDRA already knows Peter's location and this picture just confirms it. It's better to be safe than sorry."

Tony stared at Pepper for a long time, breathing heavily as the tension in his body slowly emanated away. It was in situations like these, especially, that he was eternally grateful for Pepper Potts. Nobody else seemed to be capable of calming his alarmingly short fuse, particularly when he was so stressed.

"Okay," he nodded eventually. "Okay." An artificial, almost mechanical wave of calm was slowly spreading over him, replacing what was, only moments ago, uncontrollable panic. It wasn't completely authentic, but it would have to do.

Unfortunately, it was at that exact moment that Steve, Bucky, Sam, Bruce, Clint, Rhodey, Thor and Nat decided to enter the communal area.

"Tony, what the hell is going on?" Steve demanded, striding urgently over to the sofa where Tony and Pepper were seated. "We just saw the news, the UN's blowing up, they're calling for the Accords to be revised and signed immediately or else they're taking legal action."

"Good, I'm glad!" Tony shouted suddenly. "Get me the damned papers and let's sign them, then, I really don't give a shit at this point."

"You know it's not that simple, Tony," Nat cut in.

"Really? 'Cause it sounds pretty simple to me," Tony practically growled. "We get the papers, we sign, we keep our asses out of jail. This isn't up for debate."

"There's other solutions to this," Sam argued. "You've cooled off way bigger legal arguments than this, Tony, your lawyers are worth about fifty million each. Don't pretend this isn't anything but you just trying to work that article in your favour."

"Well, what else is he supposed to do, let it explode out of control?" Rhodey shot back angrily. "Look, if we don't want the media to come prying about Peter, these Accords are the best solution. We sign, appease the UN, and get them the hell off our backs."

"Who says that's going to do anything?" Sam pointed out. "Who says they're gonna stop asking questions about Peter?"

"Guys, guys, *guys*," Bruce shouted, holding his hand up to silence Tony. "The Peter debate is beside the point, it's a completely different issue. Tony can't control the paparazzi. What he *can* control, and all of us as well, is whether or not we're gonna become a bunch of wanted criminals overnight."

*Thank you, Bruce Banner.* Good to know there was someone else on his side, Tony thought, apart from Rhodey and Pepper. And Natasha, apparently, because as soon as Tony had concluded that it

was going to be four against seven-

"I say we sign," Nat said abruptly. "It's the only way we're going to get this situation even somewhat under control."

"Wrong," Steve said. "It's not going to improve matters, it's going to make them worse. What do you think is the first thing they're going to do once we sign, guys? Host a drinking party to celebrate? No, they're going to attack us. Use their newfound legal traction to basically knock down our front door until we explain why Tony's apparently adopted an unidentified fifteen year old kid. That doesn't sound like *under control* to me - in fact, it sounds like the complete opposite."

"Like Sam said, there are these things called lawyers," Rhodey replied. "We'll work it out."

"Not even lawyers can defend someone who outright broke the law, though," Clint spoke up. "None of us are Peter's legal guardians; technically, we could be holding him against his will. How is the government supposed to know the difference?"

"And there's also me," Bucky added quietly.

"Oh, of course," Tony sneered, "let's not forget you."

"Hey, people already suspect that you guys had something to do with me getting out of jail," Bucky replied defensively. "If they find solid evidence of that, the Avengers' credibility goes completely out of the window, signed Accords or not."

"So you guys are saying we should just accept our status as criminals?" Bruce challenged. "A status which doesn't exist yet, might I add?"

"It very nearly does!" Steve exclaimed. "A bunch of signed papers won't mean anything if they find out about Peter, or Bucky--"

"Steve, buddy, you're contradicting yourself," Rhodey interjected furiously. "You're saying that we're gonna get in trouble if we sign these Accords and they decide they've earned the right to come snooping in the Tower, but what about if we don't sign? Forget *trouble* - we'll be straight up jailed, end of story."

"I think you mortals are forgetting your HYDRA problem here," Thor spoke up. "As the backswing-man stated, the Accords mean that you'll be led by your mighty rulers, instead of yourselves. What if they prevent you from attacking HYDRA when you need to?"

"Yes, *thank you*, Thor," Sam nodded. "You guys are all cool with conveniently ignoring that minor issue?"

"Tony, you know HYDRA's a threat, you said it yourself," Steve added fervently. "We have to take action against them, and soon, but these Accords might not let us do that. What do you suggest then, that we just let them swoop in and take Peter? Do nothing?"

"And what's our alternative, Cap?" Tony yelled furiously. "Don't sign, get sent to jail, leave Peter defenceless and let HYDRA take him anyway?"

"Which wouldn't be a problem in the first place, if you and Peter hadn't been caught at the mall yesterday," Steve shot back, folding his arms. "I'm sorry, Tony, I'm not saying this is your fault, but really? Taking Peter out to the *mall*, in broad daylight? It's a breeding ground for journalists, you could have at least *told* us you were planning on doing that--"

“Speaking of communication,” Tony interrupted, fury completely taking over, “who was the one who conducted an illegal deal to smuggle Barnes out of the Icebox without telling half the team? Oh, that’s right - it was *you*, Cap.”

“I already apologised for that,” Steve replied, eyes burning. “I told you I’d inform you of anything else I did, didn’t I? Yet here we are, with you making the exact same mistake!”

“There’s a bit of a difference between consorting with the black market and going out for Christmas shopping, for God’s sakes!” Tony yelled. “Jesus, I wanna take your gift back now! Can you blame a guy for trying to get Peter out of the house, he’s been losing his mind stuck in here every day-”

“I can leave.”

The voice was so small, so hesitant, that at first Tony didn’t even register it. He broke off, confusion flooding through him because *no one* on the team would speak with such trembling uncertainty at a time like this-

He realised, then, who it was.

Peter was standing in the doorway, his shoulders hunched up near his ears, the dull, vacant expression masking his face deceived slightly by the pained look in his eyes. Abruptly, the argument faded to nothing as every member of the team turned to look at Peter.

“What’s that, kid?” Tony asked, carefully controlling his voice so that it wouldn’t betray any of the sudden fear he felt at the look on Peter’s face.

Peter swallowed, the mask of impassiveness again contradicted by the way his hands were shaking.

“I - I can leave,” he repeated unsteadily. “You know. If you want me to.”

“Squirt, what the hell are you going on about?” Clint asked gently.

It was amazing, really, how quickly the atmosphere of the room had changed; only a few seconds ago, the air had been ablaze with the collective heat of dangerous fury, so intense that it had appeared to melt the very walls. At Peter’s arrival, though, all the tension had immediately sapped away, to be replaced by shocked, apprehensive silence.

“Well,” Peter stammered. “I saw the news - again - and I, uh, I heard you talking. About the Accords. And - and me. So, you know, if it’ll make things easier...I can - I can leave.”

Tony felt a sudden, overwhelming wave of guilt rise up from his gut and crash over him. Peter had heard the argument. He’d heard the things they’d said. He glanced over at Steve, and saw his feelings of shame mirrored in the man’s facial expression; it was the two of them, after all, that had mentioned Peter the most.

“Kid,” Tony said, very gently, “why don’t you come sit down?”

Peter swallowed once, but nodded after only a moment’s hesitation; shakily, he walked over to the sofa and took a seat next to Tony.

“Listen, Pete, I’m just gonna go ahead and say it,” Tony said calmly, running a hand through his hair. “There’s no way we’re gonna make you leave the Tower.”

“None of us are,” Steve agreed, looking uncharacteristically pale. “That’s a promise. I’m sorry if we made you think otherwise, with what we were saying, but you have to understand - none of what we said was directed at you.”

“But I saw it all over the news,” Peter said miserably. “Everyone thinks I’m this poor kid that you’re hiding away, that you’re forcing me to become an Avenger-”

“Yeah, so fuck what everyone else thinks,” Tony interrupted viciously. “Seriously, Pete. Fuck them.”

“*Language*, Tony,” Steve murmured from beside him, more out of habit than anything else.

“Listen, squirt, we’re the Avengers,” Clint spoke up. “You think we haven’t dealt with this kind of scrutiny from the media before? We get heat all the time, and it always manages to blow over - it’s just part of leading the superhero lifestyle.”

The pained, haunted look in Peter’s eyes had completely taken over his features, now; he wasn’t even trying to conceal his emotions anymore.

“But what about the Accords?” he almost whispered. “I messed things up for you guys, they’re forcing you to sign now because of me - if I just left, if I just went away-”

“We would all probably sit in the lounge room and bawl our eyes out for a month,” Natasha finished, a hint of a smile on her lips. “Actually, screw that, a year. We want you here, we all do. And I know I kind of have a track record of kicking you out-” Peter’s lips quirked, just a little, at this - “but I swear we’re not gonna have a repeat of that, okay? You’re here to stay, Peter.”

Peter took a deep, shaky breath. “Okay,” he muttered. “Okay. I just - I feel so bad, I’m causing you guys so much trouble-”

“Ah-ah. None of that, kid,” Tony cut in loudly, wagging a finger in Peter’s direction. “You’re not allowed to feel guilty, got that? None of this is your fault.”

Tony was all too aware of the hypocrisy of his statement - after all, it was *Tony* who’d been having a mental breakdown only seconds ago because of the uncontrollable guilt that was seizing his chest - but he conveniently ignored this. Not everyone had to drown in their own guilt issues. If Tony could prevent Peter from falling into the same dark, suffocating hole that he’d somehow managed to trap himself in, then he’d consider that a win.

“It’s the media,” Bruce added. “The media, the paparazzi, the press, the whole goddamn *world*... but it’s not you, Pete. Definitely not you.”

“And it would be so boring without you here,” Steve added. “You’re my only actually-challenging boxing partner. The rest of these guys can barely take a punch, I’d probably prefer to go back into the ice.”

This was a little more than a slight exaggeration, and everyone in the room knew it (including Peter). Yet so focused were the Avengers on convincing Peter to stay, no one moved to correct Steve, as they would have done in any other circumstances.

“And what about me, squirt?” Clint whined. “I’ve still gotta beat you in Mario Kart. You can’t leave me high and dry and defeated, it’d kill me.”

“And don’t forget our cooking sessions,” Sam said fervently. “How would I pass my time without my fellow baking buddy? No one else in the Tower can so much as flip a pancake, I really need

you to help me out.”

“I too would miss you, Peter,” Thor pitched in. “It has been nice having a fellow being around that knows nothing of Earth’s odd traditions.”

“Not to mention the fact that Tony would literally be reduced to a depressed lump of useless fat if you left,” Rhodey grinned. “Trust me, kid. Not a good idea.”

“Just stay,” Pepper breathed softly. “No one wants you gone. In fact, we all want the opposite. Please just stay.”

For a long moment, Peter didn’t respond. The internal struggle was written clear all over his face; it was obvious that the kid didn’t *really* want to leave the Tower, not by a long shot, but his godforsaken self-sacrificing nature was getting in the way of things. Tony made a mental note to take Peter out on several self-indulging activities - anything to get the kid to stop playing the part of sacrificial lamb.

Finally, though, Peter’s expression collapsed into a relieved resignation.

“Alright,” he mumbled. “Okay. I’ll stay.”

*Oh, thank God for that.* Tony didn’t realise how tightly he’d been holding himself until Peter gave in; with a sudden rush, the tension flowed out of his body, with raw relief taking its place. He couldn’t deny it - Peter had scared him there for a moment. Big time.

*Wow, you must be getting soft. There aren’t even any bad guys around and you’re freaking out.*

Shoving these thoughts aside, Tony turned to Peter and clapped him good-naturedly on the back.

“Good,” he said happily. “Great. Fantastic. Wonderful. Joy to the world.”

“I get the picture, Tony,” Peter mumbled from beside him, sounding half-exasperated, half-amused.

“I gotta say, kid, you’re killing it in the theatrical business,” Tony went on. “You had me worried there. Apparently you’ve really got a feel for this melodramatics thing.”

Was it wrong to be acting humorous at a time like this? Should he be turning such a serious and tense moment into something so trivial? Probably not, but Tony did it anyway, because it was the only way he could think to handle the situation. He *really* had to get better at this whole heart-to-heart thing.

Thankfully, the comedy behind his sentiments weren’t wasted on Peter.

“Yeah, Tony, because you can definitely talk about being melodramatic,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Squirt’s got a point there,” Clint spoke up. “You’re the biggest cry baby I’ve ever known, Tony.”

“And swiftly moving on from this topic,” Tony announced loudly, choosing to ignore Clint’s jibe, “I say we settle in for the night, forget this Accords debacle and have a movie marathon.”

If Peter hadn’t been there, Tony was certain that he’d be reprimanded for trying to avoid the bigger issue at hand (namely: the Sokovia Accords). But the presence of the kid seemed to have a noticeable effect on everyone; the earlier heated tension had completely dissipated, forgotten in the wake of Peter’s terrifying suggestion to leave. It was a credit to how much Peter meant to the team

that he'd been able to singlehandedly defuse a situation as dangerously out-of-control as the earlier argument had been.

"I'm good with that," Bruce agreed. "Peter's choice, if you ask me."

"Sure," Tony nodded, before turning to address Peter. "Kid, what are you feeling?"

Peter considered the question for a moment, biting his lip. Tony was sure the kid was going to fall back on his classic staple of *Star Wars*, but Peter's eventual suggestion surprised him slightly.

"Uh, how about *Back to the Future*?" he offered with a shrug. "I saw an ad for it on TV once, it looked good."

"Oh, interesting choice," Tony said, nodding his approval. "The classic time-heist science fiction trope. Old but gold. I like it, Pete."

"Alright, let's put it on," Steve decided. "If we start now, we can watch all three by midnight."

And so it was with a rare feeling of almost-happiness that Tony scrounged through the Avengers' old Blu-Ray collection and eventually unearthed Peter's chosen movies. The whole team settled onto various cushy couches, sofas and beanbags, cosying themselves up for the night, and Sam cooked up some freshly-popped popcorn for them to enjoy while they watched the movie.

As Tony watched, the enormity of the problems at hand slowly started to decrease in size, until he could hardly remember why they'd been fighting at all. Nothing mattered except Marty McFly on screen, and Peter's head on his shoulder, and the weird buzzing feeling of satisfied drowsiness that completely cancelled out any remaining worries he might have had. Somewhere through the latter half of the franchise's second instalment, Peter drifted off to sleep against his chest, and less than half an hour later, Tony joined him, sinking into a world of blissful unawareness.

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It was the sound of softly-crinkling cardboard that lulled Tony out of his wonderful delirious haze of nothingness. Groaning slightly at being so rudely awakened, he cracked open one eyelid and saw a tall figure creeping silently across the living room floor, tiptoeing his way through the rest of the team, who were all sprawled out across the room in various states of unconsciousness.

"Shit," the figure abruptly muttered, upon tripping over what appeared to be Thor's leg (the man in question didn't so much as stir). Tony opened his second eyelid as he identified who had caused the disturbance to his sleep - he'd recognise that annoyingly-perfect voice anywhere.

"Language, Cap," he groaned softly. "You're getting more and more hypocritical by the day."

Steve jumped, startled, and exhaled in frustration.

"Dammit," he whispered. "I was trying not to wake you."

Tony groaned again, stretching out the cricks in his neck. "Yeah, well, that plan kind of failed. What are you doing over there, playing arts and crafts with popcorn boxes?"

"I was trying to clean up our mess, actually," Steve responded quietly, "but I think I've given up."

"Yeah, save it for Sam or someone else tomorrow," Tony agreed, wincing as he leaned back against the couch. "No need to go all Nanny McPhee at this time of night, Rogers."

Steve afforded him a small smile, which caught Tony slightly off guard; he'd assumed that without

the distraction of Peter's martyr tendencies, him and Steve would just go back to cold, icy silence, refusing to cooperate together until one gave in to the other. But somehow, after watching four hours of mindless sci-fi flicks and stuffing his face with popcorn, Tony realised that his fury towards the super soldier had decreased somewhat.

He wasn't about five seconds away from punching the guy in the face, at least.

Suddenly, Tony became aware of a weight on his chest. He looked down and saw that Peter's head was still there, a mop of (okay, Tony had to admit it) slightly-adorable curls falling over his face and pressing against Tony. Upon closer inspection, Tony noticed that a trail of drool was running down the kid's chin and dripping onto his shirt.

He would have been disgusted if it wasn't so endearing.

"You look stuck," Steve commented from across the room.

"Apparently I've become a makeshift bed," Tony agreed.

"I can't imagine you being very comfortable."

"Really? I'd give myself a solid king-single status. Double bed if we're feeling lucky."

Steve smiled again, shocking him for the second time, and crept over to the sofa where Tony sat. "Need a hand?"

Tony shook his head. "No, I've got him," he reassured Steve, before sliding one arm under Peter's legs and the other under his back. He stood up from the couch, picking Peter up as he did so (and stifling a grunt at the same time - it was good to know that Sam's cooking scheme was working; Peter appeared to finally be gaining some much-needed weight) and fumbled his way through the living room until he reached the doorway.

"Hey, Tony?"

The voice was soft through the darkness, and unsure; Tony only barely managed to hear Steve's words.

"Yeah?" he asked, turning around to face Steve.

Steve approached him slowly, and hesitantly, almost as if he was expecting Tony to lash out if he came anywhere near the man's personal space. Which was ironic, considering that both of Tony's arms were currently preoccupied with the sleeping form of Peter.

"I just wanted to tell you that..." Steve broke off, took a deep breath, swallowed and continued.

"I'm...I'm sorry about today. I shouldn't have lashed out at you about the Christmas shopping thing, that was stupid and selfish and yeah, hypocritical. Very hypocritical."

Tony blinked. Had he heard that right? Had Steve Rogers just admitted to being *wrong*? Before he could even attempt to formulate a relatively smooth response, Steve was talking again.

"And there's something else," he continued firmly. "I've decided - Tony, I've decided to sign the Accords. At least temporarily. I just don't see how we can continue to function cohesively if the whole world's against us."

Now would probably not be the best time to pull an *I-told-you-so* one-liner, and it took all of Tony's willpower and self-restraint to refrain from doing so. Instead, he settled with, "Why the

change of heart?”

Steve hesitated, but only for a second. “Him,” he admitted eventually, jerking his head at Peter. “We have the best chance of protecting him from HYDRA if the government’s on our side. But Tony?”

“Yes, Steve?”

“If we sign,” Steve went on, “there should be one condition. We should be allowed to attack HYDRA, regardless of the government’s input. It’s too much of a threat to ignore.”

Tony considered Steve’s proposal for a moment. It did actually make a lot of sense. One of the major downsides of the Accords, and one which he had been steadily ignoring since Steve not-so-subtly brought it up in front of Peter, was the fact that the Accords could very well prevent them from acting against HYDRA. But if the whole team managed to come to a mutual agreement, they might just be able to pull some strings, work the Accords in their favour.

“Okay,” Tony agreed. “Okay, I’ll give you that.”

“I’m glad,” Steve nodded. “Oh, and one more thing.”

“One more thing’s pushing it.”

“I think you’ll agree with me.”

Tony sighed, screwing his eyes shut and re-opening them. “Okay, just spill the beans, Cap. My arms are getting sore.”

Steve paused, choosing his words carefully, before replying.

“Just...get some of your lawyers on standby,” he said finally. “I agree we should appease the government, Tony, but maybe not forever, and especially not if these Accords go in a direction we can’t follow. By signing, we can gain some of the UN’s trust back, but also some traction to work with if we need to work the system a little bit....especially down the line.”

Again, this was something Tony couldn’t disagree with. He’d actually been thinking along the same lines, although he’d never admit that to Steve; his ego simply wouldn’t allow it. The best he could do was an easy agreeance.

“Okay,” he repeated. “Fair deal, Cap. I would shake your hand, but, you know, makeshift bed and all.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” Steve said, nodding towards Peter. “Your arms seem to be drooping, Tony. Out of shape?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Okay, moment of heartsy-feely friendship is over. I’m officially back to hating your guts.”

“Likewise,” Steve shot back, but there was another small smile playing on his lips.

Tony left the room feeling significantly lighter than he had upon entering it.

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*Hundreds of miles away, in a dark, cold, metallic room, twelve of them gathered.*

*They moved as one, a singular, mechanical, unfeeling body. Each step they took was jarred with robotic detachment; the look in their eyes was identical, a mindless, blank, hollow chasm. They were human in the physical sense of the word, but their minds were not. Their minds existed for one purpose only: to hunt. To capture. To kill.*

*“The explosive weapons are prepared for launch.” The words were Russian, and the voice that uttered them was deep and husky; he faced the twelve soldiers with a cold, clinical expression upon his features. “Your mission is simple. As soon as the weapons are released, move in from all sides. Extract the target quickly. No witnesses. Kill anyone and anything that gets in your way.”*

*Silence from the soldiers. Verbal affirmation was not necessary. They were still, absorbing the orders with dangerous attentiveness. No one doubted their compliance.*

*“The target is pictured behind me,” the man continued, gesturing to a screen on the back wall. “Memorise this image. Do not forget his face. I want this very person back here within thirty-six hours.”*

*Another steely silence.*

*“Do what you have to do to restrain him,” the man went on. “But do not seek to kill the target. Your mission is to extract, not exterminate. This is crucial.”*

*The soldiers remained still and impassive, listening blankly to the man’s every word.*

*“Do not disappoint me,” the man finished. “Dismissed.”*

*And the soldiers turned and marched after the man, leaving the room deserted save for the grainy image of Peter Parker displayed on the wall behind him.*

## Chapter End Notes

Second heads up, chapter 10 will be coming in like, two days. The reason is because it is now the holidays and one of us is going overseas. We've worked hard to provide you with the quality stuff to tide you over, but after chapter 10, updates will be less frequent than they have been over the last couple of weeks.

So yeah, feel free to leave comments and kudos, we love that stuff.

# You Belong With Us

## Chapter Notes

What's up dudes, we've got another chapter for you. This one was written in two days because we didn't want to leave you on too much of a cliffhanger, so hope you enjoy. Just a heads up, we're giving you something you didn't know you needed until now - our take on what a typical Avengers Christmas would be like :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter had woken up in his bed the day after he'd interrupted the Avengers shouting match, with only a vague memory of strong arms surrounding him and hushed voices talking about... something. Acords, HYDRA, lawyers - it took him a while to put two and two together, a shameful thing really, considering he thought himself to be of above average intelligence.

He'd fallen asleep watching *Back To The Future II*, and sometime during then and now he'd been carried to bed (like a child - how *weak*) and accidentally eavesdropped on a hushed conversation between Tony and, presumably, Steve.

When he wandered into the kitchen at around nine in the morning, he'd expected to smell the mouth-watering scent of cooking bacon, hear the cracks and pops as it sizzled in the pan and the familiar sounds of Sam telling Clint off for trying to steal from the no-doubt huge stack of pancakes. He'd expected to see various Avengers sprawled around the living room, Bruce probably reading, Thor eating his pre-breakfast snack of, you guessed it, pop-tarts, and Natasha either knitting or threatening to seriously injure someone.

So when he was met not by a chorus of greetings from the Avengers in varying states of consciousness, but by silence, he was naturally worried.

Maybe the Avengers had finally gotten sick of him. Maybe his neediness had become a burden. Maybe they just needed a break from him and his various issues.

He should've been worried by how quickly his mind convinced him that the Avengers were gone, that they had left him behind in order to get away from his pathetic need for attention. But he wasn't, because all he could focus on were the dredges of panic curling in the pit of his stomach, clawing their way up the sides and sinking into his heart. His pulse quickened along with his breathing, and the familiar sensation of *panicpanicpanic* overtook him. Great. Another panic attack. Just what he needed right now.

He stumbled his way over to the wall, leaning heavily against it and using it to make his not-so-graceful way down to the floor. He could do this. Tony had taught him how to deal with a panic attack if the man himself wasn't around to help. *Tony* - he just wanted Tony.

But he didn't have Tony.

Steeling himself, he took a deep breath. His chest expanded, and he held it. His lungs started burning, and he held it.

And then he let it out.

He repeated the process several times and Tony's words floated back to him. *"It's all in the breathing, that's the hardest part. Once you get your breathing under control, the rest will be easier."*

So he breathed.

Thirty minutes later, and the air wasn't tearing in and out of his lungs at breakneck speeds. Instead, it was warm and gentle, flowing in and out like it was supposed to. His heart rate had lowered as well, which meant he was no longer in danger of passing out, so that was a plus, if nothing else.

Because whilst he may have averted his near panic attack, the Avengers still had not returned, and Peter was starting to wonder if they ever would. Maybe his earlier predictions had been right and the Avengers had left, just too fed up with him and his problems to deal with him anymore. Or maybe something worse had happened, and they'd been taken. It was feasible, after all, he had a cult-like evil organisation hunting him.

Just as he felt his panic starting to rise again, Tony entered the room. And then Steve followed. And after them, everyone else trickled in: Rhodey, Natasha, Sam, Clint, Thor, Bruce, Pepper, Wanda and Vision. All of them were healthy, unharmed and alive. *Smiling*, even, which was a far cry from the heated tension and then tired content of last night.

Tony's gaze fell on him, and when the man's face fell into a concerned expression, Peter realised he was still curled up in a tight ball on the floor and there were tear tracks on his cheeks. Huh, when had they gotten there?

"Kid?" Tony said, his tone cautious and worried. The Avengers all ceased their various conversations at the sound of his voice. "Kid, are you okay?"

Peter sniffed. "I thought you were gone."

"Oh, no, we're right here, bud. We were just discussing our game plan for the Accords. Which we figured out, by the way."

"I-I though HYDRA had taken you, or, or you'd left..."

"No, kid. Remember how upset we were last night when you said you'd leave? Why would we go to all that effort to keep you here and then just ditch? Not to mention, we'd *never* leave you, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Okay," Peter said hurriedly, clearing his throat.

Of course they wouldn't leave. Hadn't they already proven their willingness to stay with him? To let him into their family? Logically, it made perfect sense - it was just so hard to think logically in the middle of a panic attack.

"Peter?" Tony asked. His voice much closer than it had been before. It was only then that Peter realised his eyes had closed - when had they done that? It briefly registered with him that he could no longer hear the other Avengers. Had they vacated the room to give him and Tony some space?

"Kid, can you open your eyes please?"

"Yeah," Peter said as he forced his eyelids to open.

"Did you have a panic attack, bud?"

"Yeah."

Tony sucked in a sharp breath and rubbed his thumb along Peter's cheek, wiping away the tear tracks. "I'm sorry, kid. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have left until you woke up, I should have--"

"Stop. It's okay. I-I got through it. You helped me get through it because you taught me what to do."

"But I should have been there. I thought you'd still be sleeping because of the late night and... everything else, but I still should've left a note, at least. I'm sorry."

"You always tell me off for apologising unnecessarily, Tony. I think it's about time you took your own advice," Peter said with a smile, and Tony snorted in response.

"I never take anyone's advice, least of all my own."

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They spent the rest of the day playing games: Monopoly, The Game Of Life, Connect Four, Uno, Cluedo, Scrabble. You name it, and Tony had it stashed away somewhere in his game cupboard.

Unsurprisingly, Pepper rocked at Monopoly. Apparently running a billion dollar business helped with managing money and buying properties. Who'd have thought it? The more shocking revelation though, was the fact that Tony absolutely *sucked* at it. Even Steve thrashed him, and that man had barely purchased anything since 1945.

Vision dominated at scrabble, though no one counted his victories because the android had access to the entire internet inside his head, and therefore the entire dictionary. So, if Vision was ignored, then Wanda had won, with the fantastic use of the word oxyphenbutazone. Tony, Clint and Sam had kicked up a big fuss about that not possibly being a word, but Bruce had come to Wanda's rescue.

"Actually, it is a word. Oxyphenbutazone is a discontinued, nonsteroidal, anti-inflammatory drug."

"What the *fuck* . How could you possibly know that, Red?" Clint had asked, disbelief colouring his tone.

Wanda had merely shrugged. "It's amazing what you can find at two am on YouTube."

"Amen to that," Peter murmured under his breath, and Wanda chuckled.

Cluedo was Peter's favourite game though. He loved the fact that winning the game relied solely on being good at using the power of deduction, asking the right questions and having a bit of luck with the dice. After three rounds, all of which Peter had won in under fifteen turns, they'd called it quits and said goodnight.

Apparently they needed to go to bed early so that no one would be too grumpy when Clint ran screaming through the halls at six in the morning so they could open presents (he'd been banned from waking them up any earlier than that due to an unfortunate incident in which he'd woken them up at one minute past midnight, a decision that had nearly cost him his life - a tired Natsha was not a pleasant Natasha), because it was Christmas tomorrow, a fact that had completely slipped Peter's mind. (Although really, could you blame him? He'd never had the chance to celebrate the holiday before).

There was also a lot of talk about something called a 'Christmas Contest'. Peter had no clue what that was, and from the devilish way that everyone grinned while they chatted, he wasn't sure he wanted to know. He'd find out tomorrow, and until then he'd live in blissful ignorance.

“Goodnight guys,” Peter said, waving at the adults spread out across the living room amidst the lolly wrappers, chips and game pieces - remnants of their exploits that day.

“Night, son.”

“Adios, Pete.”

“Sleep tight, squirt.”

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite!”

“Nighty night, Peter.”

“I’ll come with you, kid,” Tony said, hopping up from his spot in between Steve and Pepper and jogging over to place a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“I’m not completely hopeless, Tony. I can walk to bed by myself.”

“I know, kid, you’re such a big boy.”

“Well, I am!”

“I’m kidding, bud. Just gonna make sure you’re comfy and stuff. Explain some things.”

“Right...” Peter said, uncertainty edging his words and making his shoulders tense up.

“Relax, kiddo. Just gonna tell you about our Christmas traditions. You might have heard us talking about it? The Christmas Contest?”

“Oh, yeah. You all looked kinda devilish, I’m a little scared,” Peter admitted, causing Tony to laugh.

“Don’t be, kid. We just have the tendency to get a little obsessed with it is all. Get changed into your PJ’s and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Once Peter had completed his bedtime routine and gotten into bed, Tony plonked down next to him, swinging his legs up onto the mattress and crossing them at the ankles. “Alright, kiddo. Where was I?” he sighed, stretching his arms above him.

“This Christmas Contest thing,” Peter reminded him.

“Oh, right. So, every year we play this game after we open the presents. It’s basically a glorified version of truth or dare, but with a little sprinkle of Christmas spirit and no truths. Natasha is now and forever shall be, the Game Master - GM for short-”

“Wait, why is Natasha always the Game Master?”

“Have you *met* that woman? She always won, so we had to find a way for her to play without actually being part of the game. Her job is to make up a ton of challenges and then write them on cards. Then, she picks a person and that person has to choose a card, read it out to the rest of the group and do exactly what the challenge tells them to. Before, it’s been anything from ‘wrap a teammate in tinsel’ to ‘spray paint a giant christmas tree on the side of the Tower’. They get pretty wild. Once you’ve completed your challenge to the GM’s satisfaction you get a point and you can choose the next person to do a challenge.”

“That sounds chaotic. Are there *any* rules?”

“Uh, don’t kill anyone? What the GM says goes? I don’t know.”

“That sounds *very* safe.”

“Eh, you’re with a bunch of superheroes. You’ll be fine.”

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Sure enough, Peter was woken at exactly six am the following morning (having had just one nightmare - he was improving) by the shrill shrieking of none other than one Clint Barton.

“Everyone get up right now! I want my *presents* !”

“Shut the fuck up, birdbrain, or I’ll snap your bow in half,” came Tony’s disgruntled yell. The man’s room was right next to Peter’s own, and he snorted humorously as he rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. He must have fallen asleep again, because not five seconds later, it seemed, he was jolted awake by a furious knocking on his door.

“Peter, Tony says I’m not allowed to go into your room but please come out. There are so many presents and at least one of them has to be for me! Help a fella out!” Clint yelled from the other side of the door. Peter sent a silent thank you to Tony - he didn’t want to imagine what would have happened to Clint if the man had come bursting into his room while he was asleep.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry. I fell asleep again, I’m coming though.”

“How can you fall asleep on Christmas?”

Oh, it was Christmas. Peter really needed to get on top of the date. “Dunno, but I did it.”

“Well, hurry up. No need to get changed. We all stay in our pyjamas during Christmas anyway.”

“This better not be a ploy to embarrass me.”

“It’s not, don’t worry. Open the door and I’ll show you mine,” Clint reassured him, and Peter hopped out of bed to obey. Once he had done so, he nearly choked on the half-snort, half-laugh that made its way up his throat.

Clint was dressed in a horrid array of juxtaposing designs: an *orange* Santa hat was pulled almost down to his eyes, while a sweater with red, green and white circles on a black background contrasted atrociously with his light blue PJ pants sporting a pattern of penguins wearing Santa hats, and - *oh God* - the slippers. They were brown, and topped with almost life-sized, fluffy reindeer heads.

“Oh yeah, they’ve gotta be Christmas themed,” the man said.

“I-I’d say you’ve got that down pat.”

“Yeah! You haven’t though, apparently,” Clint said, looking down at Peter’s simple white, long-sleeved shirt and plaid pants.

“Hey, my pants have red and green on them!”

“Ugh, I suppose that’ll have to do. Here, put this on,” the man said, pulling a horribly orange Santa hat seemingly out of nowhere to match his own, and holding it out to Peter. He took the hat and placed it on his head at a jaunty angle.

Clint grinned. “Perfect, let’s go.”

When Peter entered the living room, he was greeted with the delicious smell of baking cookies and a spirited cheer from the Avengers. They were all seated in a circle around the tree and wearing Christmas-themed outfits in varying stages of horrific, from Clint - whose outfit was by far the worst, though Sam was a close second due to the light-up antlers on his head - to Natasha, who was wearing her usual all-black shirt and jeans, as well as a single band of silver tinsel around her head like a halo.

“C’mon, Peter. I saved you a seat!” Tony called, patting the empty spot next to him. Peter sank down and immediately the Avengers started up a well-practised assembly line, handing out the presents quickly and efficiently.

Peter was shocked when Tony handed him the first present which was, according to the tag, from Wanda and Vision. His shock only increased when he got another one, and then another, and then another. More and more piled up until he had collected a gift from every single person in the room. He was pretty sure he’d even seen one from Tony’s bots in the lab (it’s name was DUM-E, he recalled with a smirk).

Peter genuinely had not expected any gifts from the Avengers. He was new, an outsider - kind of. They had only met him a month ago, yet here they were, tearing into their own presents like what they had just done for him was nothing. Like they hadn’t just confirmed his hopes and dreams - they really had wholeheartedly accepted him into the fold of the family they’d created here.

Tony must have noticed he hadn’t touched the pile of presents in front of him yet, because he leaned over and whispered in his ear. “You all good, kiddo? You’ve been staring at the tree for a while now - did you see a squirrel in it or something?”

“No, no. I’m good, great actually. I’m really great.”

Tony smiled warmly. “I’m glad kiddo, now get going on your presents. I wanna see your face when you open mine!”

Peter did as he asked, and was soon surrounded by a stack of unwrapped gifts and shreds or wrapping paper. Wanda and Vision had bought him a book called *The Big Book Of Pop Culture*, something Peter was eternally grateful for (at the moment, Steve had more knowledge of pop culture than he did. *Steve*, of all people) and was already interested to read further, despite the fact that he’d only skimmed the first few pages.

Sam had bought him a recipe book filled with hundreds of different meals of varying difficulties. There was a note inside that read: *maybe we can cook some of these together, what do you think?*, complete with a smiley face.

Clint had paired up with Thor and they had gotten him an assortment of pop-tarts and video games. There was a card with it too and it said; *Sorry about the pop-tarts, squirt. I couldn’t convince Thor that you wouldn’t appreciate them as much as he did. Can’t wait to beat you at these video games!*, causing Peter to grin. Of course Thor wouldn’t want to give anything other than pop-tarts as his gifts, regardless of whether the receiver actually enjoyed them or not.

Natasha had bought him a wicked-looking knife. The handle was slender and seemed to absorb all light, and the intricate carvings seemed to move as he spun it expertly in his hand. Impeccable balance, perfectly sharpened, professional craftsmanship - it was great quality. Unluckily for him, Tony had squawked at the sight of it, hastily removing it from his grasp and running out of the room - probably to dispose of it - shouting something about minors and deadly weapons as he did so. Natasha watched as he left, then turned to him with a wink and pulled a second knife from somewhere, exactly the same as the last one, but possibly even sharper.

Bruce and Pepper combined their present into one, but it left Peter very confused, not that he wasn't grateful. It was just that they'd bought him exactly what he thought Tony was getting him - a freakishly large amount of Star Wars Lego sets. At Peter's confused expression, Tony rushed to explain, having returned from wherever he'd hid the knife. "I knew you'd follow me at the mall, you being the sneaky little shit you are, so I thought I'd bamboozle you. I take it that it worked?"

Peter laughed at his own stupidity. Tony was a world-renowned *genius*, the man wasn't going to just allow himself to be spied on so easily.

Steve had gotten him a new set of boxing gloves - his old ones were in tatters from their frequent matches, which involved a lot of superstrength. From the way the man shared a glance with Bucky when Peter thanked him profusely, he gathered that the gift was also from the other man. Peter offered up a tentative smile of gratitude to Bucky, who shot back his own, unsure grin.

The last present he opened was from Tony and Rhodey. It was a small box, and when Peter opened it he saw a revamped version of his web shooters. They were smaller and sleeker, but the biggest change was the addition of a small dial near the base. According to Tony, with the help of Rhodey - who'd come up with a lot of the ideas - he'd created several different modes of his original webs, including taser webs, stun webs, web bombs, and many others.

"This is so cool," Peter said, his tone awed, before wrapping the two men in a tight hug.

Once everyone had opened their presents, Peter handed Tony a USB. There was a 'Merry Christmas' tag attached to it, and when Rhodey saw the exchange he grinned. Apart from Peter, he was the only one that knew what was on that USB.

"What's this, kiddo?"

"Your Christmas present!"

"Pete, you didn't have to get me anything."

"But I wanted to. Just plug it in. FRIDAY knows what to do."

"Alright, alright," Tony said, curiosity leaching into his words. He plugged it in and a holographic screen immediately popped up. It was all black, except for the words 'Proof That Tony Stark Is Loved' in a simple, white, font. FRIDAY played it and a string of strangers appeared on the screen, each saying why they liked Iron Man, or Tony Stark, or both. This was followed by recordings of the Avengers, Pepper, and finally, Peter.

"I love Tony Stark because he saved me. Because he's always there when I have a nightmare. Because he'll always read *Harry Potter* to me when I'm too scared to go back to sleep afterwards, no matter what the time is. Because he'll let me work in his lab with him, even though it's his sacred space. Because he'll take me to do the randomest things, but I'll always have fun. Because he's my hero."

There was silence for a few moments, and then Tony sniffed. He looked at Peter, eyes suspiciously watery and red. "Thanks, kiddo. That-that, just, *thanks*."

Peter smiled. "Of course, Tony."

"C'mere you," Tony growled gruffly, pulling Peter into a hug and holding him tightly.

Once the billionaire had pulled himself together, they commenced the Christmas Contest. Natasha sat at the head of the table they'd moved to, a stack of cards held firmly in her grip and her best



poker-face in place (which meant that not even Wanda had a clue what she was thinking).

Sam had stacked so many dishes of food on the table that Peter, who was seated at the other end, almost couldn't see the woman. When he asked why there was so much food, he was told that the Christmas Contest lasted until midnight, and so the food that was there was lunch, dinner and snacks (they'd had breakfast while opening the presents).

"Alright, does anyone need me to rehash the rules?" Natasha asked.

Wanda stuck her hand up. "I've only played this once, so yes please."

"Okay, what I say goes. I choose someone to pick a card, they do so, read out the challenge, complete the challenge to *my* satisfaction and then you get a point and can choose someone else to go next. Each person has three passes, which enables them to back out of a challenge. If you do not complete a challenge to my satisfaction, I will not award you the point. While we wait for the challenge to be completed, you may gorge yourself on these snacks, provided by Sam," Natasha explained, sending a nod to Sam, who grinned back. "No leaving the Tower premises, and no killing or seriously harming anyone. Some challenges may involve a partner - you have the liberty to choose this partner unless stated otherwise. We will have as many rounds as we can, and the end of each round is signified by each person at this table - barring myself, of course - having completed a challenge, unless they back out. The winner gets to choose what we have to eat for dessert. And it can be *anything* . Now, the game has begun," Natasha said, her voice ominous and evil. "My first choice is... Clint."

"Ugh, every year, Nat!" Clint said, his tone disgruntled as he reached for a card. "*Kiss three Christmas-themed objects, picked by a person of your choosing, blindfolded. You are not allowed to know what these objects are* . Oh boy, uh, I choose... Pepper. She'll be nice won't she?"

"Haha, big mistake, buddy," Pepper chuckled darkly as she tied the blindfold provided by Natasha around Clint's eyes. Then, she grabbed a slipper off Thor's foot that looked like a dead possum dyed red and green, a golden pinecone from the Christmas Tree and a dish of jelly from the table.

Once Clint had kissed each object - with respective responses of, "eugh, why is there *hair* in my mouth?", "is that paint?" and, "should I be concerned about the squishiness of whatever the fuck this is?" - Natasha tallied the point, and Pepper returned the objects to their places. Clint then chose the next person to go. His unlucky victim...

"You, squirt."

Peter got up with a groan and picked a card from Natasha's hands. "*Pour a cup of eggnog or chocolate milk over yourself. You may then go and change* .

"Ugh, I like these PJ's. I'm never gonna get the stain out!" Peter complained as he grabbed a cup of chocolate milk - there was no way he was going anywhere near the eggnog, it looked untrustworthy - and, taking a deep breath, poured it over his head. Once the cup was empty, he shivered and opened his eyes to see the rest of the Avengers laughing so hard that they physically could not make a sound.

"Yep, I'm getting changed now. Bye," Peter said as he ran out of the room.

When he returned, Natasha had put a tally underneath his name. Peter surveyed the team, trying to decide who he should pick on. "I choose... Thor."

"What? But I gave you pop-tarts!" Thor cried, disbelief colouring his tone.

“Hurry up, Point Break, time's-a-wastin’,” Tony said.

The god huffed grudgingly and picked up a card. “ *Eat a tablespoon of Sam’s chili jam* . Oh no, I do not like the spicy foods that you Midgardians have created. It burns me in places that shouldn’t be burnt,” Thor said, a hint of fear in his eyes as he spooned the jam into his mouth. He gulped it down and immediately rushed to the fridge, where he downed an entire bottle of milk in two seconds flat. “That... was torture,” he panted. “Falcon-Man, you are next.”

Sam’s grinning face fell as he picked up a card. “ *Get dressed up in the outfit provided by the GM, take a selfie, and post it on a social media platform of your choosing. This may not be taken down* . Great, just great. It’s not like I have a reputation to uphold or anything.”  
The responding chorus of “you don’t” from everyone else made Sam’s scowl deepen.

“Alright, Nat. What’s this outfit?”

“This,” she said simply, reaching under her chair and pulling out what seemed to be a brown heap of fabric. “Get changed and come back out when you’re ready.”

About two minutes later, they heard an “Aw, hell no!” from the direction Sam had disappeared to. Ten minutes after that, the man came stumbling out, dressed in what appeared to be...

“Is that a slutty reindeer costume? Natasha, you *genius* !” Tony crowed.

“Hey now, are you slut-shaming the reindeer, Tones?” Rhodey interrupted.

“Everyone shut up, I wanna get this over with,” Sam mumbled as he pulled out his phone and snapped a quick photo. He typed for a few seconds, before pressing a button with finality and sighing in relief. “Can I take this off now?”

“Yeah, you can. I’ve viewed the post. It’s verified. Point to you,” Natasha said.

“Great,” Sam sighed in relief, before running off.

Once he had returned to the room, back into his normal clothes, Sam grinned evilly at everyone. “Stark, you’re up next. This is what you get for slut-shaming my costume.”

“I feel like that’s fair,” Tony said passively as he got up to grab a card. “ *Sing the first verse of Jingle Bells while eating spoonfuls of peanut butter* . That’s not too bad. Alright, here we go,” Tony admitted, wandering over to the cupboard and grabbing the container. Peter watched eagerly - he was keen to see this one.

“ Dashing troo da shnow

In a wun-horsh op’n sleick

O'er da fiels we go

Laughing all da way

Bellsh on bob’ailsh ‘ing

Ma’ing shpiritsh brigh’

Wha’ fun i’ ish ‘oo ‘ide and shing

A shleihing shong tonigh’”

By the end of the verse, everyone, including Tony, was wheezing with laughter and the billionaire's goatee was filled with an unappealing mixture of peanut butter and saliva.

"Ugh, that's gross," Tony said as he ran a hand over the beard. "I'm going to go wash this off? Do I get my point?"

"You most certainly do."

When Tony returned, he chose Bruce to go next. The man looked apprehensive as he picked up a card. "*Make up a 10 second rap about Santa and animal cruelty*." "Uh, I'm a man of science, not a man of art. I apologise in advance for any bleeding ears or permanently traumatised brains. Umm... My name is Santa and I really like... uh, Fanta, but that's not all I like.

Animal cruelty is my game and... building a toy empire is my aim.

Nothing brings me more joy...

than bullying my reindeer, uh, Troy.

Umm, sometimes you just gotta be free

And I achieve that by doing what comes naturally

Yeah, I love bullying my elves too

But they aren't animals, so it makes me kinda... blue."

Bruce finished, the tips of his ears burning a bright red while everyone howled with laughter. Peter couldn't believe what he'd just heard with his own two ears. Doctor Bruce Banner, a man with seven PhD's, rapping about animal cruelty and Santa.

"Okay, that's enough. Steve, you're next," Bruce said quickly, eager to get out of the spotlight.

Steve was still chuckling as he approached Natasha and picked up a card. "*Let yourself, and your clothes, be painted with candy cane stripes from head to toe, and stay like that for the rest of the game. You may choose who paints you*." "Shit...aki fried chicken," Steve said, his chuckles turning into a groan as he read the challenge.

"Heh, nice save, Cap," Tony chuckled.

"Shut it, Tony. I choose Bucky to paint me."

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On and on the challenges went. They made it to seven rounds before midnight struck, and by then, Peter was drooping into Tony's chest, half-asleep already. The man had one arm wrapped around him, while the other carded through his hair absentmindedly. The food was decimated (mostly by Thor, Steve, and Peter), and everyone was in varying states of disarray, except for Natasha, who looked as impeccable as ever. That was probably helped by the fact that she didn't have to participate in any of the challenges.

"Alright, let me tally up the points. You get an extra point for every pass not used - I forgot to mention that at the beginning, sorry newbies. Once the winner is declared and they have chosen the desert, we'll save the consumption until tomorrow morning so that we can go to bed," Natasha announced, casting a fond look at Peter, who was now more asleep than awake and drooling onto

Tony's shirt. "The winner is, drumroll please...Bruce Banner, with a total of nine points, having used zero passes and failing only one challenge!"

Everyone cheered quietly, which Peter assumed, through his dream-like state, was to ensure that they didn't wake him up fully.

"Rest assured everyone, I'll be a fair ruler," Bruce announced. "We can have ice cream - none of that anchovies shit that Tony pulled last year."

"Heh, that was funny. Well, goodnight everyone. I think it's time to get this gremlin to bed," Tony said, shifting in preparation to stand up.

"M not a greml'n," Peter mumbled tiredly.

"Whatever you say, kid."

"Night ev'ryone."

Tony put Peter to bed without incident and as he drifted off to sleep again, Peter smiled. He'd never had a Christmas before, but this was the best first Christmas he could've asked for.

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Tony awoke the next morning to the wonderful tune of his throbbing head. Groaning, he rolled over in bed and buried his face deep into the pillows, trying desperately to ease the pain somewhat. As it turned out, drinking himself stupid with the Avengers last night after he'd put Peter to bed had *not* been the smartest of choices, especially considering that he was supposed to be attending a press conference with half the team in two hours. This killer hangover was going to be a bitch to deal with, he could just feel it.

Upon realising that his 'smother-the-pain-away' tactic was achieving exactly nothing, Tony groaned again and reluctantly dragged himself out of bed. The headache increased a hundredfold as he stood up, a painfully persistent reminder of last night's over-indulgence in whiskey. (Tony was pretty sure he'd chugged a whole bottle in a matter of seconds at one point. *God*, was he regretting that decision now.) Tony had a dysfunctional habit of going all out or not going at all, and it appeared that this trait applied to his drinking as well.

"Okay FRI, bring up some recipes for your best hangover cure," Tony commanded FRIDAY as he groggily changed into a fresh pair of trousers and a shirt.

"*Right away, boss.*"

Ten minutes later, Tony had all-but hauled Sam out of bed, and the two men were busy concocting their own replica of what was self-proclaimed as '*The 100% success-rate health drink guaranteed to cure that headache from last night's splurge*'. They made seven serves of the drink, each of which were handed out to Steve, Nat, Bruce, Clint, Sam, Rhodey and Tony himself, respectively. Tony almost choked on his glass as the foul, acidic liquid burned down his throat, but he forced himself to swallow the rest.

"This shit better work," Clint grimaced, looking similarly disgusted as he downed his glass.

"Tastes like rotten eggs and jellied cow liver had a baby."

Tony couldn't disagree with that.

Two hours later, though, and the magic of carrot juice and liquefied beetroots appeared to finally kick in; Tony's torture in the form of his killer headache was reduced to merely an annoying throb, and his energy levels returned to somewhat functional. (Although if he was being honest, that was probably more due to the five cups of coffee than anything else.)

"Okay, get out of that outfit," Pepper told him, upon entering his room and finding Tony in his AC/DC shirt and scrappy grey trousers. "You're going to a press conference with the United Nations, Tony, you can't go in wearing that."

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" Tony complained. "I personally think it's a great display of humanity. I'm showing my appreciation for something that's not enhanced or a potentially world-ending weapon. Really plays down the intimidation factor, you know?"

Tony only lasted about five seconds under Pepper's skin-shrivelling death glare before he succumbed, and reluctantly changed into a smart suit.

It was moments like these that reminded Tony why he hated press conferences. God, they were so *formal*. Far too uptight for his liking.

Unfortunately, this particular press conference was one that he couldn't buy his way out of. It wasn't every day that a group of enhanced superheroes tried to bargain with the government about a document signed by 117 countries, after all. They were playing with fire, and Tony knew it. He just hoped that, for once, the fire worked in his favour.

It probably wouldn't.

"Okay, guys, are we all set?" Rhodey asked once the seven attending Avengers were gathered in the communal area.

"Ready to burn the government to the ground?" Clint added for emphasis.

"Alright, love the enthusiasm, Barton, but that's not really the mindset we need to have," Steve spoke up, addressing the team from his place in the centre of the room. "If we want to sell this to the UN, we're going to need to sound...for lack of a better word..."

"Like total ass-kissers?" Tony supplied helpfully.

Steve winced, nodding as though the notion of this caused him physical pain. "I hate to say it, but yeah, that pretty much sums it up. We're on probation here, guys. We put one more toe out of line, the government's not going to give two hoots about anything we say. If we want to work these Accords in our favour, gain some leeway to include the HYDRA condition, then we need to play it safe. And if that means grovelling at their feet for a couple of hours, then so be it."

"Ah, shit, Cap, you know the whole *submissive pushover* persona's not really my jam," Clint groaned. "I'm gonna struggle with this one."

*Yeah, you're not the only one.* The very idea of having to keep his opinions to himself was the stuff of nightmares to Tony; he was fairly certain he had a phobia of remaining silent for an extended period of time.

"Can't say I'm the most professional of grovellers either, buddy," Tony cut in, shooting Clint a pointed look, "but we can't all have it how we want, can we?"

“You can sit out, Clint, if your maturity levels really can’t handle it,” Natasha offered dryly, folding her arms.

Clint promptly took the opportunity to flip her off. “Nah, not happening. ‘Bout time I proved you guys wrong at something. Maybe today will finally be my lucky break.”

“I severely doubt that,” Natasha muttered under her breath.

Before Clint could argue further, Steve abruptly cut in and took control of the conversation once more.

“Remember our strategy,” he advised the team, looking at each of them periodically in the eye. “Avoid as many questions about Peter and Bucky as we can, and if we’re faced with one that we can’t downplay, answer with the story we discussed.”

Tony’s gut twisted suddenly as Steve’s words reminded him of the stakes weighing on this conference. If they weren’t convincing enough, Peter could very well be taken by Child Protection Services. It was a thought that made him want to vomit up the remains of his hangover cure.

“Guys, we better get going,” Bruce suggested. “Conference starts in half an hour.”

“Okay,” Tony agreed. “Just give me three minutes, I gotta do something first.”

And then, before anyone on the team could question what, exactly, was so urgent that Tony had to risk being late for the press conference in order to do it, Tony promptly exited the room and took the elevator to the bedroom floor.

“Hey, kid?” he called thirty seconds later, raising a fist to knock on Peter’s door. “You in there?”

“Where else would I be?” came the muffled reply.

Grinning despite himself at Peter’s snarkiness (which seemed to be increasing exponentially by the day; it was becoming a bit of an issue, especially when Tony was sure it wouldn’t be long before the kid could match, or maybe even overtake, his own King of Snark title), Tony pushed the door open and stepped inside.

“True, I sometimes forget that you’re just an old hermit at heart, kid,” Tony announced as he entered Peter’s room. “Like an introverted little grandpa, you feel me?”

“Okay, I take personal offence to that,” Peter replied, scowling at Tony. “If you really want to talk about who’s the biggest hermit, I feel like I have to mention the fact that you could spend weeks on end holed up in that workshop of yours.”

“Ah, see that’s where I’m one step ahead of you, kiddo,” Tony shot back. “Been there, done that. I think my record’s two months straight, actually.”

Peter stared at him, a small smirk on his lips. “Did you - Tony, I think you just contradicted yourself. You did, actually. I just beat you in an argument.”

Tony waved a hand dismissively, conveniently ignoring this point. “Nah, kid, I’m just keeping myself humble,” he replied easily. “Now, anyway, you’re distracting me. I gotta head to this stupid press conference in a minute, just wanted to check in on you before you left.”

“Oh, well, you can cross that off your list,” Peter grinned. “I’m alive and well, as you can see. Consider me checked.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at him. "You gonna be right by yourself for a few hours?"

"Believe it or not, Tony, this isn't the first time I've been alone before."

"Thor's out, but Wanda, Vision, Bucky and Pepper are gonna be in the Tower if you need them, okay?"

Peter nodded again. "Got it."

"And I got FRIDAY to put the Tower in lockdown mode," Tony added, "so no unwanted guests are gonna find their way in while we're gone." He didn't need to elaborate on this statement - Peter was more than aware of the *unwanted guests* he was referring to.

"Sounds good," Peter said.

There was a moment of comfortable silence. Tony considered Peter for a second, wondering where he'd developed this seemingly out-of-nowhere issue with separating himself from the kid, and why he was apparently incapable of thinking rationally when it came to Peter. For a man who prided himself on his powers of deductive reasoning, it was more than a little humiliating to be reduced to such an illogical, worrying mess whenever Peter was involved.

*Screw it. If I'm gonna turn all mother hen on the kid, I may as well go all out.*

That was how Tony found himself crossing the room and embracing the kid in a tight embrace, mussing his hair affectionately as he did so.

"See you soon," Tony told him. "Feel free to test out your new web shooters - on the condition you don't burn down the place while doing so. And don't even think about going near my AC/DC merch collection, because you'll wake up tomorrow to find every single one of your cute science pun T-shirts reduced to ash as payback. Oh, and if you find any remnants of what will deceptively look like a delicious, harmless fruit juice in the kitchen, don't drink it. Unless you wanna be puking over a toilet bowl five minutes later, that is."

"Okay, got it," Peter nodded. He hesitated, then glanced up at Tony, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Would that *deceptively harmless fruit juice* be a hangover cure, by any chance?"

"No," Tony replied quickly. "No, definitely not. No way. That's ridiculous, Pete." He broke off, staring down at Peter, who was watching him with that damned lie-detector look of his. "Okay fine, you got me. How'd you know?"

"You stink," Peter told him matter-of-factly. "Really bad, like you drowned yourself in alcohol."

"*Shit*," Tony cursed under his breath. "Thanks for the heads up, kiddo," he added, as he jogged out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Peter called.

"Bathroom. Gotta go bathe myself in deodorant."

"Did you know that alcohol is the third leading cause of preventable deaths in the USA?" Peter yelled as he exited the room. "FRIDAY told me that."

"Shut it, kid," Tony yelled back. "We'll discuss my extensively long list of questionable life choices another time."

By midday, Tony, Steve, Sam, Rhodey, Bruce, Clint and Natasha were all seated behind a long table, facing a large crowd of frantic-looking paparazzi. Tony couldn't name a single media outlet that *hadn't* sent a journalist out to witness their conference; evidently, the Avengers' hot family gossip was a selling point for the press.

"Jeez, could there be any more of them?" Sam muttered as they waited for the buzzing sea of journalists to settle themselves. "They look like a sea of oversized piranhas down there."

"Look at you," Tony said loudly from his seat. "Starstruck by your first press conference experience. Trust me, Wilson, it gets really old really fast."

"Okay, sorry that not all of us own multi-billion dollar companies that find their way into lawsuits on a weekly basis," Sam replied dryly. "I'll try better in the future, that make you happy?"

Tony nodded. "It would, actually. Thanks a bunch."

"Guys?" Steve called, from his seat next to Tony. "Get ready, we're about to start."

"Alright. Allow the expert to do the honours here," Tony answered, before standing up and addressing the sea of oversized piranhas, as Sam had so crudely, albeit accurately, labelled the reporters.

"Okay, hey everyone, cool your jets, it's time to start," Tony announced. "If anyone needs a refresher, I'm here with: Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanov, Sam Wilson, James Rhodes, Clint Barton and Bruce Banner. We're going to be addressing the Accords first, and then we'll take any questions you guys have."

"And what if we have questions right now?" a reporter called, a man sporting tied-back dreadlocks and an awfully trimmed goatee (if the fate of the Avengers' freedom hadn't been on the line, Tony would have offered to give him some pointers on the art of expertly trimming facial hair, something he considered himself to have mastered a long time ago). "Questions like who the hell is this guy?" the reporter added, waving a printed-out copy of the grainy image of Peter's zoomed-in face at the mall.

Tony swallowed, a dangerous combination of fear and anger welling up inside of him - two minutes in and they were *already* getting bombarded with questions about Peter? This was going to be even worse than he'd originally anticipated - but it was Natasha who, upon noticing Tony's reckless tendencies start to take over, came to the rescue.

"We'll address any questions you might have at the end," she reinstated firmly. "For now, we'd like to explain the Sokovia Accords."

To Tony's immense satisfaction, the obnoxious reporter promptly backed down. Tony still had half a mind to recommend him some decent hair products to the guy on top of a goatee lesson - those greasy dreadlocks looked to be in dire need of a good dose of shampoo - but he managed to suppress this urge, instead sitting down and plastering what he hoped was a grave, respect-commanding expression across his face.

"Over the past few days," Steve began, speaking calmly and slowly as a multitude of cameras started to flash repeatedly around them, "we've given the Sokovia Accords a great deal of careful consideration, consulting with one another to come up with the solution that benefits not only us as individuals, but the world at large."



Well, this was a highly edited version of events - Tony wouldn't exactly use the phrase *careful consideration* to accurately describe the several screaming matches that had occurred at the Tower as a result of the Accords.

"After some debate, we've come to an agreement which we hope will be accepted by the UN," Steve continued steadily. "We've decided to sign the Sokovia Accords."

The explosive reaction was immediate; the reporters sprung to life, cameras flashing wildly as a torrent of frantic questions was directed towards them. Through the chaos, Tony could only make out a few.

"What pushed you to make this decision?"

"Aren't you worried about a loss of control?"

"Do you think this will improve the Avengers' reputation overall?"

It took several minutes before the relentless attack of questions eased somewhat, and Steve took this opportunity to hastily continue his explanation.

"Yes, the Avengers have collectively decided to sign the Accords," he went on. "We do so in the hopes that it will ultimately limit the amount of damage caused by us, and the threats that we face. As unintentional as our past mistakes have been, no one can deny that they have, in fact, happened, and by accepting these terms and conditions, we feel that we can optimise the Avengers' efficiency without compromising the safety of the public."

Good. That was good. Steve was playing the conservative game, sticking to the strategy they'd discussed; first overplay the signing of the Accords to gain moral high ground, and then move in with-

"We do, however, humbly ask for some leeway," Steve added, still in that calm, collected tone. "In light of the fact that we are willing to become a non-private organisation, and have agreed to hand ourselves over to the operational control of the UN, we would like to make just one request." Steve broke off for a moment, and the tension in the room was palpable; the press were all on the edge of their seats, waiting with bated breath for the second shoe to drop. "There is one immediate problem that continues to pose a threat to not just us, but to civilians across the globe. That threat is HYDRA, the Nazi-formed Deep Science Division that was originally created by Hitler in World War II."

A babble of sound erupted once more, cameras flashing into overdrive as the journalists waited eagerly for more.

"And what has HYDRA got to do with the Accords, Captain Rogers?" one reporter called out.

Steve hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "We would like to request permission to make just one exception to the Accords. HYDRA must be treated as an immediate threat, one which we can take action against at any time that we feel such action is necessary. Even if they do not appear to be launching any major attacks, HYDRA is still an ongoing problem, and there's no moral debate surrounding this. It's a fact. Therefore, we believe that it's not too much to ask for some freedom surrounding HYDRA, freedom to move against them at any time in order to protect our world from the very real threat that they pose."

The babble of sound rose to deafening level once more, with questions being thrown left, right and centre. To Tony's immense annoyance, it was Mr Dreadlocks who managed to ask the first audible

question over the frenzied sea of unintelligible noise.

“Are you giving the UN an ultimatum?” he called out. “A make-or-break condition, in other words?”

“No, not at all,” Natasha answered smoothly. “We understand that the signing of the Accords is not up for debate. There’s no decision here; being led by the UN is, logistically and morally, the best and wisest path for us moving forward. However, we hope that the United Nations can recognise that while some of the threats we move against may be considered ambiguous, in the sense that we created more harm than good by attacking them, HYDRA is not one such threat. It is an organisation of highly dangerous assassins, equipped with extremely advanced technology, lethal weapons, and the use of inhumane practices on soldiers, such as torture and brainwashing. If people don’t consider HYDRA a threat, they’re digging their own, ignorant grave. An organisation so powerful should not, and cannot, be ignored any longer.”

“With all due respect, Miss Romanov, why should we leave it to the Avengers to ensure that HYDRA is eliminated?” another reporter called, a woman with crisp blonde hair. “Considering the incident in Lagos, which occurred only a month ago, I think I speak for the vast majority of people when I say that the Avengers’ ability to handle threats in a safe and secure way is being seriously questioned.”

Natasha paused a moment before answering this question.

“Without sounding arrogant,” she responded eventually, “HYDRA is an organisation that recruits specifically enhanced individuals. These individuals are put through extensive amounts of combat training, as well as biological enhancement programmes, to produce a brand of elite super-soldiers. To make a comparison, the average strength of a fully trained HYDRA operative is about the same as that of Captain America.” She nodded briefly to Steve, before continuing, “That’s not the kind of threat that can be controlled with a few police officers, or even a large army of police officers. I’m sorry, but I’m afraid that the only way to fully subdue HYDRA is to match their strength with similarly enhanced people, such as the ones sitting beside me today.”

Tony let out a small breath of relief at this. No matter how the press tried to spin it, surely nobody would be ignorant enough to ignore *that* particular point, one which was very much valid. If Natasha’s speech didn’t convince the UN to allow for their HYDRA condition, he didn’t know what would.

“Any other questions?” Rhodey called out.

“Yes, actually,” another reporter replied. “I’m just wondering if any of you would be able to comment on this photo?” For the second time that afternoon, the blurry image of Peter with Tony was held up for all the cameras to see.

Tony swallowed, steeling himself for possibly the most crucial part of this conference. He was the one in charge of answering questions about Peter, and he quickly ran over the story in his head before replying.

“Of course,” he said. “The boy in that photograph is a minor who we found homeless on the streets several weeks ago. He has no recorded family that we know of, and since we’re all humans with basic moral compasses, we decided to take him into the Tower. And I think that’s a fair decision when you consider our alternative, which was to leave him to starve to death on the streets.”

“That’s all well and good,” came an obnoxious voice. Mr Dreadlocks again, Tony realised with a grimace. “But how do we know that any of you are actually qualified to take care of a minor? You

*are* the group of people that have caused the deaths of countless civilians in the space of a few years, after all.”

“If I could just cut in,” Bruce spoke up, “whilst we all feel terrible sorrow for the civilian deaths that have occurred in the last few years, I feel that it’s necessary to point out that those deaths were not caused by us *directly*. We aren’t a group of murderous vigilantes who go around killing civilians on a regular basis.”

“And the people who lost their lives to our numerous battles over the years still haunt us today,” Steve added. “It’s something we haven’t been able to move on from, and it’s caused us many sleepless nights.”

Tony didn’t think he’d ever heard a more accurate statement in his whole life.

“But consider this,” Natasha added. “If we *hadn’t* been there to neutralise those threats, how many more would have died? Without retracting from the terrible tragedy of those that *have* lost their lives, I would ask you to think of how many more could have ended up with a similarly awful fate if we hadn’t intervened.”

“That still leaves the issue of the minor, though,” Mr Dreadlocks went on.

God, this guy just *would not* shut up. Tony didn’t know how much longer he could restrain the urge to walk over to the guy and whack him across the head with his severely outdated camera.

“Yeah, regarding the *minor*,” Tony spoke up, unable to stop the sarcasm seeping into his tone ever so slightly, “we’ve actually got it all worked out. Social services will conduct a background check on all of us, to make sure we are capable of and qualified to be providing shelter for a minor, and once we’re given the thumbs up, our results will be processed and I’ll be issued a form to sign claiming temporary guardianship. We’ll still be getting checked on regularly to make sure we’re not, you know, abusing the poor guy, which would never happen of course, but it’s a short-term solution until the kid in question finds a permanent home.” It wasn’t completely true, but it wasn’t a downright lie either. And at any rate, there was no way the media could fault them on this one; Tony had made sure to research the legality behind assuming temporary guardianship before the press conference, and he was very well informed on the basic processes involved.

“Is that all?” Steve asked, once the journalists had been given sufficient time to digest Tony’s well-rehearsed (though admittedly slightly improvised - he hadn’t intended to include the abused part) speech.

“No, Captain Rogers,” called another reporter. “I’d like to hear your statements regarding the recent escape of James ‘Bucky’ Barnes from the Icebox. Are you aware that there is speculation the Avengers were involved in the illegal smuggling of this man?”

Steve took a moment before answering this question, although his face betrayed none of the trepidation he was undoubtedly experiencing at the mention of Bucky’s ‘escape’.

“As a team, we are all unaware of who was involved with Barnes’ escape,” he replied eventually, and Tony had to hand it to the guy; Steve was a relatively smooth liar. “Now I know there is speculation surrounding our involvement, but before these accusations go too far, I’d like to first ask the public what real, tangible evidence is available to back up these claims-”

“STOP! STOP THE MEETING!”

Abruptly, Steve’s words were drowned out by the sound of doors slamming open as a deep,

thundering voice filled the room. Tony glanced up, his heart leaping into his throat as he registered the panicked edge that accompanied the voice of whoever had just broken into the conference like a banshee, and saw Thor pushing his way through the crowd of reporters, a look of pure terror on his face.

Tony's heart began pumping in his ears. In all the time he'd known Thor - even while they were fighting dimension-hopping, murder-seeking aliens together - he'd never seen the demigod look so terrified.

"Thor? Thor, what's wrong? Say something, man," Sam urged, as Thor finally wrestled his way through the throng of confused reporters to the table behind which the Avengers sat.

For a moment, Thor didn't respond, the wheezing, laboured nature of his breathing rendering him incapable of speech. With another jolt of trepidation, Tony noticed that Thor was wielding Mjolnir in his right hand, and he was dressed in his combat robes.

That could only mean one thing.

"I - just came back from - day with Jane," the demigod panted, sounding uncharacteristically flustered. "Went - to Tower - and - and-" Thor broke off suddenly, all efforts of communication abruptly abandoned as he struggled to withdraw a breath.

"Thor, take it easy," Steve instructed calmly, his face pale. "Just take some deep breaths, talk to us."

Thor obeyed, bending over double and taking several slow, shuddering breaths before straightening up once more. When he righted himself, he looked slightly more stable, though no less terrified.

"I saw the Tower in ruins," he said. "Half of it destroyed. And Wanda, Vision, Pepper and Bucky all unconscious."

It took Tony a moment to realise that there was something very, *very* wrong with that statement.

*Wanda, Vision, Pepper and Bucky all unconscious.*

*Wanda, Vision, Pepper and Bucky.*

Only four names. Not five, like there should have been. Only four.

"Thor," Tony asked, his own voice suddenly sounding very far away, "what about Peter?"

"He - I couldn't see him," Thor whispered. "I looked everywhere, but he was gone. And then - that woman - the invisible one, Weekend or something...she said that they'd taken him."

Tony couldn't breathe. Around him, the conference room was in chaos; reporters shouting, cameras being forced ungraciously into their faces, people demanding to know what had happened...but Tony didn't see or hear any of it. He was frozen, rooted to the spot and unable to move, unable to speak, unable to *breathe*, unable to do anything but stand, paralysed, in a whirlwind of raw, undiluted terror.

And then, from a million miles away, he heard Steve's voice:

"Who, Thor? Who took him?"

He should have known. He should have known what Thor was going to say. He'd predicted this

was going to happen, right from the very start.

Yet it had happened anyway.

And he'd done nothing.

“HYDRA.”

His worst fears were confirmed, and just like that, Tony's world came crashing down.

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They did not slip into the Tower unannounced - a silent force of efficient power.

No.

Instead, there was an explosion that rocked the very foundations of the building, shaking the walls loudly enough to send Peter sprawling out of his bed and onto the floor, slipping into a familiar attack position.

He tried to listen for the cause of the explosion, but the ringing in his ears was too much, overwhelming and high-pitched. Too shrill.

In the end, he didn't need to listen to find the cause.

They filed into his room, one after the other, faces blank and firm, movements tight and constricted. That wouldn't help them in a fight - he'd learned long ago that to be the victor he needed to be fluid, an ever-changing force of movement, unpredictable yet precise in his strikes.

He assessed the opposition, like he had so many times before, but never in a situation like this. Never while the lives of his family hung in the balance. He didn't know where Wanda, Vision, Pepper or Bucky were - didn't know if they were alive or...

Dead .

He prayed they were safe, uninjured, because if they weren't... that meant they'd died because of him. Their deaths would be on him. Another addition to the ever-increasing pile of sins on his shoulders.

There were twelve soldiers in all. From their blank eyes and rigid posture, he assumed that they were the other Winter Soldiers, named after the original himself. Though Peter had only heard about them in whispers when he was with HYDRA - hadn't even known if they truly existed - he had no doubt now. They were dressed in all-black, the style of their suits similar to his own, if not a little bulkier. Good - that would work to his advantage.

The HYDRA insignia on their chests seemed to leer at him, and the operative's words from before echoed in his brain - *“We're coming. You belong with us.”* In a cruel twist, it occurred to him now that that event hadn't been a half-assed kidnapping, but a scouting mission. They had been there to gather the layout of the Tower and assess the weak points, all in preparation for this much more threatening attack.

The soldiers approached as one, an unshakeable unit, and if Peter had been just a little less well-

trained he would've been quaking in his boots. However, he stilled, let calm wash over him, and then crouched lower into his attack position, muscles subtly coiling like a spring in preparation to strike.. He did not let them back him into the corner like they were so very obviously trying to do - *never reveal your plan, dumbasses* .

When they were close enough, he leapt.

The first one was down in less than ten seconds, partially because they had not been expecting him to strike first, and partially because he had moved much faster than they'd anticipated. Peter may not have been training as rigorously as he had during his HYDRA days since he'd met the Avengers, but he still had years of non-stop combat experience on these guys, and they'd recently come out of cryo - he knew from a month-long stint in there what the cold did to your muscles. All these guys had on him were numbers, maybe a bit of brawn.

In the end, though, that was enough.

He'd been doing well - three were down for the count, though dead or unconscious, he did not know, and he certainly wasn't going to take the time to check.

His room was in shambles - cracks ran along the walls from where various things (or people, including himself) had been thrown against the surface. His sheets were ripped and tangled, strewn across his bed from where he'd used them to temporarily disorientate one of the soldiers. The bookshelf was lying in pieces on the floor, testament to when Peter had thrown it at an oncoming group of six of his opponents. His wardrobe had a hole in the middle of the door, where a soldier had throttled him and then tried to punch his lights out - Peter had only just managed to dodge the fist, and it had ended up embedded in the wardrobe door, giving him enough time to escape after a well-aimed kick to the soldier's nether regions.

He'd been in the middle of fighting off seven at a time - a huge feat on its own, especially when you considered the fact that every single one of them was armed to the teeth while Peter only had the knife that Natasha had given him. He'd plunged said knife into someone's shoulder and lost track of it after that - and about three of them were taking a swing at him with their various weapons at the same time. His spider sense was so preoccupied with alerting him of the current danger he was facing that it failed to notify him of the eighth and ninth soldiers sneaking up behind him.

By the time he did notice, it was too late.

They smashed him over the head. Peter didn't know what with, but judging by the heavy clunk it made when it met his skull, he was going to have one hell of a headache when he woke up. He dropped like a stone, vision flashing white before it faded out completely. He could feel them grabbing his arm, pushing up his sleeve and injecting something into the crook of his elbow - presumably the super-drugs that HYDRA loved to use on him whenever they transferred him to a new facility. From experience, he knew that the next four hours would have him fading in and out of consciousness, all the while dealing with a body that refused to respond to his commands.

Peter managed to retain his lucidity long enough for them to drag him down the hallway and into the decimated living room, where he saw Wanda, Vision, Pepper and Bucky sprawled on the floor. He caught a glimpse of their chests rising and falling, and allowed himself to breathe out a sigh of relief because if nothing else, they were *alive* . If his situation was less life-threatening, he might have been worried about the trickle of blood making it's way down Wanda's forehead from her hairline, or the chunk of ceiling lying on Bucky's metal arm, or the dust and rubble strewn on the ground - *that was gonna be expensive to clean up* - but then his mind faded away, and he was left floating in the disorientating darkness of unconsciousness.

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Peter jolted awake and tried to sit up, but the movement was met with resistance.

*Please let it be a dream.*

But, judging by the unfamiliar concrete ceiling and his inability to sit up, it was not a dream. He strained to look down, heart sinking when he saw the thick bands of cold metal around his bare chest. He could feel them on his arms and legs too.

A face swam into his vision, one of the most frequent visitors in his endless nightmares.

His handler.

He was a balding man, with a pale, perpetually clammy face and noodle-like limbs. A scraggly moustache had grown on his upper lip since Peter had last seen him, and it almost resembled a dead caterpillar, in a morbid kind of way.

“Welcome back, Asset,” his handler wheezed, smiling with all of his teeth, looking more like a shark than a human being. “We’re going to fix you, don’t worry.”

Suddenly, Peter remembered just how crazy this man was, and everything that had been done to him while he was in their clutches, and felt a sickening twist of anxiety clench in his gut.

The man pulled a lever, and another metal restraint shot around his forehead. Peter knew what that meant, so he screamed.

## Chapter End Notes

Ummmm....remember what we said earlier about cliffhangers? Yeah, sorry to pull that on you twice in a row. Please don't kill us. Just to let y'all know, like we said last chapter, one of us is going overseas for a bit so updates will slow down a little, but they won't stop completely. Anyway, hope you enjoyed our most intense chapter yet! Thanks for all the kudos and comments, more to come soon...

# Blood, Sweat and Tears

## Chapter Notes

What's up peeps, here's our early Christmas present to all of you :) Just a heads up, things get pretty intense in this chapter, so we have to warn you that there are some descriptions of torture included. They're not too graphic, but they are there, so just be prepared for that. And if you're looking for some hardcore Peter whump then look no further, because this chapter has you covered. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter remembered the first time he'd been wiped. HYDRA had been his life for about seven years by then and he hadn't left the base at all in that time. Instead, he'd been ruthlessly trained and taught - each day had been filled with expectation, the knowledge that he would be better than The Winter Soldier.

But by the time they had strapped him to the metal contraption and promised that everything would be okay, he'd forgotten what it felt like to have the sun on his skin and fresh air in his lungs - things felt distinctly not okay, but he could never pinpoint why. All he'd ever known was the unchanging strip lights that lined the ceilings of the HYDRA base, and the filtered air. How could the only thing he knew feel so wrong?

By then he didn't feel human anymore, and - as he was told continuously by the scientists around him - he wasn't.

However, he would have taken decades in a HYDRA base, filled with unknown motives and dark intentions, over the feeling of terror in his chest and electricity in his veins as everything that made up who he was, slipped out of his grasp.

It always started with him waking up, strapped to a ridiculously cold, metal table, the kind of cold that caused the bone-deep ache of exhaustion in his limbs and the chill of terror in his lungs. His handler usually showed up some time after that and assured him that they were doing this for him, for his benefit. It never felt like he was benefiting from it, but he didn't question it - why would he? He didn't have another answer to replace the constant one that HYDRA had been.

This time though, there were no fragile assurances. His handler wasted no time in pulling the lever that shot unbearable pain through his veins, crackling and white-hot. Peter let out a short, frightened scream through the mouthpiece that prevented him from biting his own tongue off - an addition that was supposedly brought about by a particularly unpleasant incident involving the Winter Soldier himself, or so Peter had heard. Believe it or not, the agents of HYDRA were furious gossipers.

When his handler started to read the godforsaken words in the uncaring tone that had shaped Peter's childhood, the boy felt the familiar feeling of everything that made him who he was slipping away. He started panicking in earnest; almost involuntarily his body started bucking against the unyielding metal restraints and his breath sped up into harsh pants.

He didn't want to forget. He didn't want to forget Tony, or any of the other Avengers. He didn't want to forget the months he'd spent with them and he didn't want to lose the person he'd become



since he'd escaped the clawing hands of HYDRA. *He just didn't want to forget .*

He *couldn't* forget. He couldn't go back to being *The Spider* .

As the electricity coursed through his veins, burning his skin in the places it entered his body, he thought of the Avengers and everything they'd done for him, how willing they'd been to envelope him in the folds of their family.

Boxing with Steve, the man being horrified when he learned that Peter didn't wrap his knuckles - had never learnt how - and the twenty minutes he spent teaching the boy how to do it.

Mario Kart with Clint, Peter getting better and better with each round they played, with the older man becoming more and more frustrated at the same rate, his annoyed howls echoing around the Tower.

Learning how to cook with Sam, progressing from a simple grilled cheese sandwich to a lemon meringue pie in a matter of weeks, with only a few minor explosions along the way.

Yoga with Natasha, learning the subtle art of the exercise and the patience required to do it well.

Reading over complicated scientific theories Bruce, and discussing the likelihood of anything actually eventuating from them.

Eating more than humanly possible with Thor, usually pop-tarts. The god was not a happy man if he went without a box of pop-tarts for too long.

Reading *Harry Potter* with Tony after the man had calmed him down from a nightmare in the middle of the night, never once complaining about the loss of sleep or the sore throats he got as a result.

Working together with Tony for an unhealthy amount of time in the workshop, usually Steve, Rhodey or Pepper would have to come and tell them to call it quits. FRIDAY was such a snitch.

Bantering and bickering, watching movies, making puzzles - all with Tony.

Tony.

*Tony* .

That man was his saving grace, the reason he wasn't living as a homeless teenager on the streets of New York. The reason he wasn't locked up in an insane asylum or a jail somewhere for doing something thought to be socially unacceptable (otherwise known as illegal) by regular people. The reason he had started to feel *any* semblance of normal in the wild wind storm that was his life.

As his handler said the words that had been dominating his nightmares since the day he left, Peter could feel the memories seeping away, like water swirling down a drain, slipping through a sieve. He was panicking. *He did not want to forget.*

So he plugged the drain and caught the water.

Someone was screaming, and he recognised vaguely that it was him, but it wasn't the agonised screams of a boy whose every fibre was on fire, not entirely, at least. There was an undercurrent of determination in his shouts, fueled by his desire to *remember* .

Eventually, after what seemed like centuries, his handler stopped reading the words and the

electricity tapered out. He was left lying on the cold metal, sweating profusely and on the verge of vomiting his insides up. It was a familiar feeling, though no less unpleasant - at least this time it wasn't coupled with the feeling of vague emptiness, a strange kind of numbness, in his mind.

"Asset! What is your purpose?" his handler asked, so confident in his belief that the wiping process had been a success. Peter couldn't wait to burst that little bubble for him.

"As of now, I've decided it's to piss you off as much as possible."

His handler looked flabbergasted, clammy face paling and mouth flopping open like a fish out of water. "Wha-but... that should've worked..."

"Whoops, my bad. Guess I just like to do the impossible. It's a character trait of mine that I discovered. Did you know that I beat every single one of the Avengers in laser tag?"

"Repeat the process. You were never this chatty before," his handler growled, his sad little moustache flopping morosely as he talked. He gestured to the underling hovering beside him, and the boy - because he couldn't have been much older than Peter himself - approached the lever cautiously, as if it might shock him too. The guy looked about two seconds away from barfing up his breakfast, and Peter felt sympathy swell in his chest, which was odd given his current predicament.

As the electricity entered his body once more, he forced out a reply through his gritted teeth and the mouthpiece. "It's just another character trait I discovered."

This time, it was almost easier to keep his memories locked up where they should be, and the time passed quicker too. He was still in unspeakable agony, but the task of holding onto the essence of who he was turned out to be a great distraction from the pain.

When it ended, Peter looked his handler in the eye. "Still here, and now I know more naughty words, bitch."

His handler's eyes widened, panic flickering across his features for a second before he gestured for another repeat of the brainwashing. The timid-looking guard approached the lever yet again and as the unbridled agony fried him from the inside out for the third time that day, something occurred to him.

In all his years at HYDRA, he'd never once learned his handler's name.

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The press conference had crumbled into ruins. Reporters were shouting over the top of each other, shoving cameras into his face, taking pictures and videos so frantically that the flash of photographs blurred into one disorientating, never-ending, blinding beam of light. They were like a group of hungry rats, desperate to be the first to sell this breaking news to the press and subsequently earn their claim to fame.

Tony ignored all of them.

It was easy to do. Easy to ignore everything. The intense, mind-crushing surge of panic that he'd experienced only moments earlier had all but evaporated, forced into the dark recesses of his mind

where it couldn't control him. He felt absolutely nothing. Only a detached, artificial numbness. A numbness that he knew, subconsciously, wasn't real, but one which he clung to anyway, because better to be numb than to be-

But no. He wasn't thinking about that yet. He wasn't even considering the prospect

It took all of ten seconds for him to suit up, but it felt like the longest ten seconds of his life. Beside him, Rhodey was doing the same. Sam was activating his wings. Thor was spinning Mjolnir. Steve was grabbing his shield. Working as a mechanical, unthinking unit, they did what they did best. They prepared for war.

Because they were the Avengers. Punching things was what they did. Battle was the only way they knew how to handle loss, threat, fear - it was their coping mechanism, their first line instinctual defence, ingrained within each of them from years and years of training. And so they did the only thing they knew how to do. They prepared, once again, to fight, each one of them fully aware, deep down, underneath the facade of false hope, that any action they took would be futile. Each one of them aware that there was nothing left to fight *against*.

But Tony couldn't face this reality. Not yet. It was too dark, too painful, too surreal. Better just to feel nothing, to slip into his mechanical, detached haze while they lived out this poorly-fabricated fantasy, returned to the Tower in a blaze of vengeance and adrenaline-fueled aggression, ready to fend off the HYDRA agents that were, of course, conveniently waiting to be fended off.

He couldn't give up. Not until he'd at least *tried* to do something.

Otherwise, the crippling guilt would be too much.

"Let's go," Steve said, a stoic determination coating each word, and Tony nodded numbly. One final flicker of hope surged through him, so faint it was barely tangible, but enough to trigger him into action. Maybe Thor was wrong. Maybe he hadn't looked hard enough.

They assumed their standard travelling positions, the positions they'd assumed countless times before; Sam carrying Natasha, Thor carrying Steve, Rhodey carrying Clint, Tony carrying Bruce. Tony activated his flight power and then they were off, the others flying in his wake, bursting through the glass windows and leaving nothing but a frenzied mass of babbling reporters in their wakes.

The journey to the Tower should have been quick. No less than a few minutes, in fact.

Why, then, did it feel like a million ages had passed in those few short minutes?

Tony knew the answer to this. Just as he knew what he would find when they eventually arrived at the Tower. But, because it was the only thing he physically *could* do, he buried this knowledge. Ignored all sense of logic and reason. Peter wasn't gone, because he *couldn't* be gone. Tony needed him, and that was enough.

That was enough.

That had to be enough.

But then they arrived at the mess of crumbling rubble and smoking metal that had once made up the communal area of the Tower, and Tony was staring at the truth, like a horrible punch to the gut. Unavoidable, real evidence, right before his eyes. There was no denying it.

Thor had been right.

Everything he'd said had been right.

The deluded numbness slipped away, all the remains of his horribly misguided optimism draining into nothing, and crippling guilt came crashing down to replace it.

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It took more than a little maneuvering for the Avengers to enter the Tower safely, what with the treacherous rubble that adorned the middle section of its left flank, but in a horribly ironic twist, their determination and inescapable terror turned out to be useful; it was extremely difficult to feel appropriate fear for your own wellbeing and safety when one of your teammates was in the process of being probably-tortured by an evil, brainwashing organisation.

Tony knew they would need to deal with the damaged part of the Tower soon, not to mention the growing mass of paparazzi that was rapidly collecting footage of the collapsed structures, both from foot and in helicopters, but right now they had a much bigger, more pressing problem. A problem that had Tony struggling to keep his already-upset stomach (thank you, alcohol binge) under control, as well as his intake of oxygen, which was becoming increasingly painful and laborious.

A problem named Peter.

"FRIDAY, shut down the Tower," Tony commanded as soon as they'd landed inside said Tower. "Activate emergency blockade. We don't want anyone coming in, got it? Press, HYDRA, no one."

*"On it, boss."*

There was a resounding screech of metal-on-metal as FRIDAY proceeded to lower the Tower's outer shield, a layer of shockproof metal that Tony himself had designed to shield the Tower from external attack. The irony was not lost on him that if he'd performed this extra safety measure only three hours ago, the Tower would most likely still be intact and *not* missing an occupant.

*Why the fuck did you think 'lockdown mode' was going to be enough? What kind of genius are you, Tony Stark?*

"Okay, let's spread out," Steve commanded. "Establish if there are any threats remaining in the building. Thor, did you see anything while you were here?"

Thor nodded solemnly. "Yes, three unconscious, all in - in Peter's room." He winced slightly as he said this, as though the words caused him physical pain.

Tony didn't disagree. Just the very mention of Peter had his heart racing, pounding furiously against his chest in a desperate attempt to free itself, his airway constricting into a familiar tight chamber, preventing any air from coming in or out-

*Stop it. You've got to stay calm. You've got to stay in control.*

"Okay, Thor, it's your job to guard that room," Steve decided, falling back onto his familiar role of issuing orders. "Stand at the door, make sure they don't wake up and try to take us by surprise. Clint and Natasha, you head down to the ground floor and work your way up. Make sure every room is secure. Sam, Rhodey and I will do the same starting from the top. Bruce and Tony, you guys are in charge of casualties. Take Pepper, Wanda, Vision and Bucky to the Med Bay, get them checked up. Be careful of any threats remaining in the building."

Tony nodded, swallowing past the terrible lump in his throat. He could still feel the raw,

uncontrollable panic coiling around the edges of his mind, threatening to erupt into a fully-fledged anxiety attack at any second, but he focused instead on his mission, on the task he'd been given. By concentrating all of his energy on completing the task at hand, he would maybe just be able to keep the panic monster at bay.

The Avengers split off into their various positions, and Bruce and Tony made their way into the living room, where Thor had mentioned seeing the unconscious members of the team. Sure enough, it wasn't long before they stumbled across the limp forms of Wanda, Vision, Bucky and Pepper, all thoroughly knocked out. Tony's breath caught in his throat at the sight of Pepper, and his heart stopped for just a moment, but upon closer inspection he could see that her chest was rising and falling without hindrance.

Thank God. Peter was already causing enough of this internal, panicky turmoil as it was; if Pepper had been seriously injured, or worse, that would have been one too many nightmares for Tony to take.

He knelt down beside her and surveyed her closely, searching for the cause of her unconsciousness. Within seconds, Tony noticed a painful-looking purple lump on her right temple, swollen and bruised. All signs indicated towards a one-hit knock-out.

"Bruce," he called, beckoning the scientist over. Once Bruce was crouched over Pepper's crumpled form, he gestured to the aforementioned bruise. "Is this bad? Internal bleeding, do you reckon?"

Bruce peered closely at the lump, taking in its qualities with a practised eye. "My guess is no," he said finally, causing the tension in Tony's shoulders to ease just a little, "but I'll need a scan to check. Either way, it doesn't look life-threatening. Probably just a mild concussion, I'd say."

"Thank God for you and your PhDs," Tony muttered, giving Bruce a small clap on the back. It was the most reassuring gesture he could offer, given the circumstances.

Wanda had shared a similar fate with Pepper; a similarly swollen lump on her forehead and a trickle of blood from a small cut were the only visible wounds she bore. Vision and Bucky had suffered marginally worse injuries - the former with one of his metallic leg joints being torn apart entirely, as well as head trauma, and the latter with several broken bones, including crushed ribs, and a burn on his left arm (presumably from the explosion of the Tower) but on the whole, none of the four were in a critical condition. It was obvious that they hadn't been HYDRA's targets - merely annoying setbacks, to be dealt with in the fastest and most efficient way possible before closing in on their true goal.

Which had been Peter.

Swallowing past the sudden nausea that had arisen in his throat at this thought, Tony mentally shook himself. He couldn't afford to think about the kid. Not yet. Not if he wanted to stay calm. There were still people that needed him, plans that required his presence in order to be formed. He needed to keep his head clear and panic-free if he wanted to track HYDRA down.

Although, he couldn't deny it - the notion of even attempting to trace an organisation as stealthy, thorough and low-profile as HYDRA was almost enough to erupt the poorly-suppressed panic still threatening the corners of his mind.

*Nope. Not thinking about that yet. Focus, Tony.*

"Let's take them to the Med Bay," Bruce said. "I need to run some diagnostics, you can help me sort them out."

Tony was no idiot. He was fully aware that Bruce was more than capable of running said diagnostics on his own, without Tony's input, and that the man was only including Tony in this equation in an effort to distract him. To stop him from exploding into Uncontrollable-Panicked-Frenzy-Mode, in other words. But he refrained from bringing this up with Bruce. The guy wasn't wrong.

Together, they carefully moved Pepper, Wanda, Vision and Bucky into four identical beds in the Med Bay. Bruce immediately set to work running the necessary diagnostics to assess their conditions, all the while issuing instructions to Tony, who obeyed each and every one with an uncharacteristic lack of protest. Once they had ascertained the extent of the injuries, Bruce began administering the necessary medications, while Tony busied himself repairing the damage done to Vision's leg. All the while, as he stoically worked away at the broken metal and torn wiring, the same three words were repeating themselves in Tony's brain, over and over, an endless symphony of unrestrained panic.

*Peter's been taken.*

*Peter's been taken.*

*Peter's been taken.*

And what was really killing him - what was relentlessly eating away at his insides, tearing him hollow from the inside out and leaving nothing but a gaping chasm behind - wasn't the panic. It was the *guilt*. Because for whatever stupid, pathetic, fucked-up reason, Tony couldn't seem to stop failing this kid. No matter what he did.

*A press conference. You left Peter alone for a fucking press conference. You risked his life just to talk to Dreadlocks for a few hours.*

"Tony?"

Tony jumped so forcefully that he almost yanked Vision's leg right back out of its socket. Hurriedly, he glanced up to find Bruce watching him from across the room, eyebrows furrowed in concern.

"Yeah?" Tony asked, his heart still hammering relentlessly against his chest.

"Um...I think you're done there," Bruce pointed out hesitantly. "You've been over-screwing that bolt for almost five minutes now. Vision looks pretty fixed to me, pal."

Tony looked down and saw that Bruce was right; lost in his suffocating, guilt-ridden haze, Tony had failed to notice that he'd already successfully repaired Vision's leg over ten minutes ago. Abruptly, he dropped the screwdriver.

"Oh," he said quickly. "Yeah, right. Of course. Just trying to, you know, get that daily bicep workout in, flex the pecs a little bit..." He trailed off at the look on Bruce's face.

"Tony," the man asked quietly, "are you - are you okay?"

*Nope. Very far from it, in fact.*

Tony nodded his head vigorously. "Yeah, of course. Why would - what - why wouldn't I be okay?"

Even to his own ears, his half-hearted statements sounded pitiful, and the overall unconvincingness wasn't lost on Bruce, either. The man continued to watch him, his expression of

concern deepening with every second that passed, until finally he spoke again.

“We’re going to find him,” Bruce said determinedly. “You know that, right? We’re gonna get him back, Tony. I promise you.”

Tony froze at Bruce’s words, feeling a sudden surge of uncontrollable emotion rise up within him. Swallowing past it, he buried it deep in his mind, as he always did, along with the pile of panic and guilt and god knows what else.

“I know,” said Tony. “Because I don’t know what I’m gonna do if we don’t.”

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Seven times.

They’d tried to brainwash him *seven* times. If HYDRA was anything, it was determined.

By the end of it, Peter’s muscles felt like jelly, and his limbs jerked uncontrollably at random intervals. He was covered in sweat and sucking in air like he’d never get it again - it was *extremely* hard to breathe when he had hundreds of volts of electricity running through his body.

However, he had not forgotten. He still knew every detail of the past months, and his handler was angrier than Peter had ever seen him before. He’d asked the question ‘why?’, over and over again.

“Why isn’t it removing his memories? It did last time,” his handler muttered to the timid guard - Peter had dubbed him Mousy. The boy had just shrugged, clearly new to the whole HYDRA thing and not an expert on the wiping process.

Peter, however, had an answer to that particular question. “Because, dipshit, I have something to remember now. Before I escaped, you made sure I had nothing to live for and therefore nothing worth remembering. Now I do. Also, I’ve discovered I’m really pig-headed. That’ll be fun for you,” Peter laughed, sounding slightly unhinged (being electrified seven times in a row probably had something to do with that). Luckily for him, HYDRA had taught him how to withstand torture and interrogations - that hadn’t been a fun year - which meant he was now equipped to keep up the cocky facade he’d created. The name-calling was real though - he’d called his handler every rude name under the sun and then some. Peter had to say, watching his tormentor grow increasingly frustrated each time he bounced back from the wiping process was a lot of fun, especially when he got to call the older man a name that would make Steve lecture him for a solid hour on the importance of watching his language.

Eventually, just like Peter had been expecting, his handler snapped - the man hadn’t trained to be on the receiving end of manipulation, only to dish it out. What Peter hadn’t expected was for the dark glint in the older man’s eyes that had been hovering at the edges until now, to take over completely.

His handler growled. “This very clearly is not working. Guard, go fetch six of the Winter Soldiers and T-18.”

Peter raised a single eyebrow. “Ooh, what’s T-18? Something special for me? Maybe a nice hot meal? I’m hungry, you know.”

“No, it’s my favourite torture rack,” his handler answered bluntly, a glint of something terrifying in his eyes now. Peter’s eyes widened slightly in shock before he managed to control his expression.

“Jesus, how sick do you have to be to have a favourite *torture rack* ?” Peter questioned, using snark to hide the way his voice shook minutely. He clenched his hands into fists at his side to hide the way they had started to tremble and steadfastly ignored the way anxiety had started to rise in his stomach.

“I figured if we can’t get The Spider back, we can at least get valuable information about the Avengers.”

He would be fine. He would have to withstand this for a day, two at most, and then the Avengers would come and save him. Peter knew from experience that he could last for months under torture, and the team would find him before that. Definitely.

They were probably at the Tower right now, figuring out their plan of action. Right?

There was no way they were busying themselves with the cleanup instead of finding him because the burden they’d been trying to get rid of for months had finally been taken off their hands and there was no reason to try and get them back.

No .

No. He knew what these kinds of intrusive thoughts did to a person. The Avengers loved him, or at least liked him enough to not want to leave him at HYDRA - their ridiculous hero complexes would see to that. And hadn’t they proved time and time again that they did, in fact, like having him at the Tower? He was being stupid. They’d come get him, and maybe he could break out in the meantime and make their job easier.

A quick tug at the restraints proved that would not be possible at the moment. After enduring several attempts at brainwashing, he was weaker than normal.

“I wouldn’t waste your energy, Asset. Those cuffs are vibranium. Not even Captain America would be able to break through those.”

Peter flinched minutely at the name. He hated that even now, when he’d broken out of their control, his handler was still calling him Asset. “Wow, you really brought out the big guns for me didn’t you?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” his handler grinned, his oddly perfect teeth showing in the malicious expression. It was odd that such a twisted man could have such straight, white teeth, but life wasn’t fair, was it? Peter was proof of that.

A short while later, Mousy entered, pushing a metal cart that clattered against the uneven floor. There were various wicked-looking tools lying on the tray and they glinted in the harsh artificial light, like they were trying to attract Peter’s gaze. He refused to look though, and instead focused his attention on the six Winter Soldiers that trailed in after Mousy. He noticed with satisfaction that a few of them were sporting injuries from their little tussle earlier.

His handler gave out several orders that Peter felt too sick to listen to. Being shocked seven times by hundreds of volts of electricity, plus the promise of slow and painful torture (he was now considering the possibility that antagonising his handler had not been the best move. But he’d already begun digging the hole, might as well keep going), meant that Peter’s breakfast was now threatening to make an ugly reappearance.

Suddenly, his restraints were gone, but before he had the chance to act on the unexpected chance at freedom, six pairs of hands seized him. Well, now he knew what the Winter Soldiers were for.

They moved him down the hall, his bare feet slapping unevenly on the floor - they'd taken his socks *and* his shirt? Now that was just *rude* - as his handler lead the way and Mousy rattled behind. He struggled, but his limbs were still jerking involuntarily on occasion, and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to break the hold of all six of them at his strongest, let alone now.

He was pushed roughly into a metal chair, his elbow smashing against the arm - that was going to leave a mark. Immediately, restraints shot around his wrists and ankles, and he determined that they, too, were made of vibranium.

Ignoring the cuffs for now in favour of observing his surroundings, he looked around to see that his chair was the only piece of furniture in the room, apart from a weird pole near the back. A place designed especially for torture then, that was *always* fun. There were no windows, which was to be expected - most HYDRA bases were underground - and the single light was right above him, casting its ugly yellow light onto him but leaving the rest of the room in varying degrees of darkness. If it weren't for his advanced sight, he wouldn't know what was lurking in the shadows.

In other words, it was a pretty typical torture room.

His handler approached him then, smiling wickedly and holding what looked like a strangely sharp scalpel. "Now, Asset, tell me about the Avengers."

"They like pina coladas and getting caught in the rain."

His handler's eye twitched, and then he dug the scalpel into Peter's bicep and dragged it down to his elbow. Peter worked to keep his face from showing anything other than confidence and to prevent the scream from escaping his lungs. He watched in morbid fascination as blood gushed from the wound and trickled down his arm. "Ya know, rule one of torture - always know what you're looking for, asstown. I technically answered your question, and you're searching in the dark."

His handler growled, and dug the scalpel into his other arm, creating a long, deep cut. "Give me access codes."

"665379. You're still searching in the dark - I just gave you the access code to the staff's bathroom at the Queens Public Library and I still technically answered your question."

"Shut it, Asset," his handler hissed, making a cut near his clavicle.

"I thought you *wanted* me to talk - rule two of torture, have a clear goal in mind and remind the subject of what that goal is. Really, you should know these, you *are* the one who taught them to me."

"Give me the access codes to the Avengers Tower."

"See, that's better, but I'm afraid I can't do that for you. A, because I don't know them, and B, because even if I did know what they were, I wouldn't just hand them over, asshole."

His handler snarled and slapped him across the face, causing Peter's head to jerk with the force. He was pretty sure there was a big ol' red handprint on his cheek now. Before he'd fully regained his senses and blinked the spots out of his vision, his handler was cutting him again, this time on the chest. "Tell me about the Avengers' next attack on HYDRA."

“You know what? *Fuck you* .”

His handler seethed, rearing up and stabbing the scalpel straight into his shoulder. The suddenness of it took Peter by surprise, and he let out a gasp of pain before clamping his mouth shut and letting out a harsh breath through his nose. The older man grinned maniacally at the reaction and twisted the blade, eliciting another surprised grunt of pain from Peter. “This will all stop if you just tell me what I want to know.”

“Go. To. Hell.”

“So be it.”

On and on the questions went, and Peter refused to answer a single one of them, adding fuel to the fire that was his handler’s hatred of him. Each time, he’d be awarded with another cut to his torso. Eventually, Mousy had to turn away - that guy wasn’t going to last long at HYDRA, he needed a strong stomach to see half the stuff the organisation did, and a heart of stone to see the other half. The boy’s reaction to his rather mundane torture, in the scheme of things, told Peter that Mousy had neither.

Slowly, his handler tired, and he called upon one of the Winter Soldiers that had been standing in a row against the wall, watching emotionlessly as the older man lay cut after cut on Peter’s chest and arms. It was a woman, about thirty years old, with dark, straight hair pulled into a simple ponytail. Her eyes were empty, and her movements regimented as she approached the chair.

Peter swallowed the thick saliva in his mouth, hoping the gulp wasn’t as loud as it sounded in the sudden quiet of the room. His handler placed the scalpel coated with his slick, red blood back on the tray and stepped back, whispering words too low for his super-hearing to pick up in the Soldier’s ear.

He got the idea not two seconds later though, when she took the first swing. She asked no questions, took no breaks and pulled no punches. It was nothing but merciless pain as hits rained down on his body, eliciting short gasps and grunts of pain from Peter if she hit a particularly tender spot. And seeing as his chest and arms currently looked like a madman had taken a knife to it (which was exactly what had happened) and blood was running down his pale skin and onto his grey sweatpants, a lot of spots were tender spots.

Peter was pretty sure she’d cracked at least three of his ribs, and she’d definitely broken his collarbone upon smashing her elbow into it. He’d both heard and *felt* the sickening *crack* it had made. He was almost glad when his spider sense warned him of a fist coming towards his head, but at the same time, who knew what kind of things these monsters would do to him while he was unconscious and vulnerable?

In the end, he didn’t get a choice. His reflexes, weighed down by the blood loss and pain, were too sluggish, and as her fist collided with his head, and the back of his skull smashed against the metal chair, he got a glimpse of the Soldier’s blank face and his handler’s dark eyes, before his vision faded to black and he felt no more.

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“Tony.”

Tony glanced up from his work bench, his eyes struggling to make out anything beyond the digital pixelation of the computer screen that he'd been staring at for the past four hours. Blinking rapidly past the blurriness, he could just make out Steve standing in the doorway, a steely resolve etched onto his features.

"They're awake."

*Thank god. Finally some not-depression-inducing news.*

Barely half a day had passed, but it felt as though several millennia had gone by since Thor's terrifying interruption of the press conference. After securing the Tower and tending to the injured Avengers, the team had restrained the three unconscious HYDRA agents in the most secure room of the building (designed by Tony for nothing other than precautionary measures, in case they were forced to contain threats inside the Tower, but now being used as a holding room for three assistants in Peter's kidnapping - the thought made him want to punch through several walls) and retreated into varying states of shocked, hopeless inaction to frantic searching for anything that may help them locate Peter. Natasha, Steve and Clint had been thoroughly combing through the Tower's large archive of CCTV footage, to see if the videos of Peter's capture would provide any clues as to his whereabouts, and had so far come up completely short. The same could be said for Bruce, Rhodey and Tony himself, all of whom had busied themselves with their respective computers, digging through countless databases and intelligence software to try and find something, anything, that might give an indication of where HYDRA had taken Peter. After half a day, the answers had remained hopelessly non-existent, and Tony was left wanting nothing more than to get in his suit, fly over to whatever hellhole they were keeping Peter in, and burn everything there to the ground.

The problem was, Tony Stark rarely got what truly he wanted.

Stretching out his stiff neck, Tony slowly hauled himself up from his workbench and followed Steve into the elevator, yawning as he did so. He wouldn't usually be tired at this time of day, not by a long shot, but the stress coupled with the guilt that still plagued the edges of his mind, not quite engulfing him fully but enough to carve his insides hollow, was getting to him. The whole afternoon, the same three words had been reverberating around his skull, destroying him from the inside and leaving nothing but a gaping chasm behind.

*It's your fault.*

If he had been there, he might have been able to stop HYDRA. If he had been there, Peter might not have been taken. If he had been there-

"You get anything out of them?" he blurted out suddenly, talking because he needed a distraction, an escape, *anything* to provide relief from the toxic war zone of his mind.

Steve shook his head, hitting the button for the floor containing the HYDRA agents. "Not yet. Natasha's in there with them now, but as far as I know that's purely for means of intimidation."

"I hope she makes them piss themselves," Tony muttered.

It was a testament to the magnitude of their collective stress levels that Steve actually laughed at this. In any other circumstances, the man simply would have simply shaken his head at such a crude attempt at humour, but now he seemed to recognise that Tony was far from in the right headspace to be cracking decent jokes.

Two minutes later, Tony entered the secured room to find three of HYDRA's elite Winter Soldiers

facing him in identical chairs, restrained with vibranium bars across their chests. Natasha was leaning against the wall opposite them, her arms crossed as she maintained an unflinching glare that somehow managed to encompass each of the three Soldiers in the room. The first was a dark-haired, strongly-built man with a neatly trimmed beard, the second a similarly muscled man but with slightly lighter coloured hair, and the third was a sullen-looking woman with brown hair cropped short and a nasty, poisonous look about her. All three of them were completely silent, jaws shut tight in speechless defiance as they returned Natasha's gut-wrenching stare with metallic, unfeeling glares of their own.

"The others are coming," Natasha told Steve and Tony quietly, and as if on cue, Bruce, Clint, Rhodey and Sam entered the room not ten seconds later.

"Barnes isn't coming, is he?" Tony muttered quietly to Steve, who shook his head minutely.

Good. That was one less problem for them to worry about - an unprecedented interaction between these scumbags and someone who was, in their eyes, a traitor deserving of death.

Tony exhaled slowly as he took a few steps towards the Winter Soldiers, eyeing them off with no warmth whatsoever. He was keenly aware that these three people had greatly assisted in Peter's capture, and would probably have been more than happy to participate in his torture (it made him sick, but Tony couldn't lie to himself - he knew torture was one of HYDRA's favourite punishments to implement, and they would make no exception for Peter), and the thought filled him with a dangerous, reckless kind of fury that by far outdid Tony's usual feelings of aggression and snarky anger. He could practically feel the blood boiling in his veins as he stared down each of their mechanical, unfeeling, godforsaken faces. What he wouldn't give to slam each of them through a wall, screaming into their faces demands about getting Peter back *right fucking now*-

*Keep it together. You're in control. Gotta keep your cool.*

It was probably a blessing that Natasha stepped in, otherwise Tony wasn't altogether sure he would have been able to restrain himself much longer.

"We know you assisted in Peter's capture," she told the Soldiers bluntly, her face cold and stony and expressionless. "There's no point denying it."

"Nat," Tony cut in, struggling to keep his voice steady through the anger still threatening to make a reappearance, "they don't know him by his name. He made it for himself once he got out."

"Oh, right," Natasha muttered. "Well, we know you took-"

"We are not stupid," the dark-haired soldier interjected, his words coated with a thick Russian accent. "We know who you are referring to."

"Do you, now?" Tony blurted out, unable to control the furious urge any longer. "You want a gold star? You know who we're talking about, that's cool, now you get a free pass out of here? That's what you think, huh? It's not that simple, jackass."

"Tony," Steve murmured, placing a warning hand on his arm. This annoyed Tony to no end, and he shook the hand off with slightly more force than necessary, but nevertheless gritted his teeth and stayed quiet.

He was too worked up to be effective whatsoever with an interrogation. He knew that. They were dealing with soldiers trained extensively to deal with this exact kind of situation, to withstand intimidation, pressure and probably a whole lot worse without giving away any information their

foes required. If they wanted answers, they would have to be a lot more subtle than the classic 'yell-in-their-face-until-they-cave' tactic.

Luckily, this was Natasha's area of expertise.

"If you're really not stupid, like you claim to be, then you'll tell us what we need to know, and quickly," she spoke up calmly, folding her arms. "We've got you, plain and simple. You can't escape these restraints, as I know you've tried; they're made of vibranium, the strongest metal out there. Either way, you're going to prison. Jail, for the rest of your life - probably the Icebox, and you *don't* want to be there. But, if you help us, we may be able to offer you a lesser sentence. We can pull some strings in court."

"We're good at doing that," Steve added earnestly, staring down the Winter Soldiers with no sympathy in his features.

"We do not need your help," the dark-haired man said, savage determination clear in his voice. "We have served our cause."

"Is that what you think you're doing? Serving a cause?" Natasha asked. "Look, I know what you've been through, what HYDRA put you through. None of you asked for this. You've been controlled, manipulated into submission after years and years of conditioning. But it's not too late to change. If you help us, we can, in turn, help you in getting back on track. There is a life for you beyond HYDRA."

"We just need to know a few things in return," Rhodey added. "We need to know where your base is. Where you've taken Peter - the boy who was kidnapped from this very building only hours ago."

It was a losing battle. You didn't have to be a genius to figure that out. Tony could see it in their faces, which had so far taken in the Avengers' offer with nothing but a cold, steely indifference. Their jaws were set in clinical determination, their eyes identically detached and stoic. HYDRA's conditioning, and obvious brainwashing, had not gone wasted on these soldiers.

Once again, Tony wanted nothing more than to rush at them. To shout at them, to shake them, to break them, to rip them apart limb from limb until they told him where Peter was. The violent urges were becoming more difficult to control, but still he just managed to keep them at bay, reminding himself of why they were doing this.

*If you want Peter back, you need to keep it together.*

"We will not be telling you anything," the female soldier said, in that same Russian accent as her dark-haired companion. "HYDRA does not negotiate."

"But you're not HYDRA," Natasha continued coolly. "You are controlled by HYDRA, yes, but you're not one of them. Not really. You've been forced. You're not acting willingly, or even consciously. You don't understand the weight of your crimes. Help us to take down HYDRA, and we will help you to regain the free will that HYDRA has stripped from you. We will help you regain a life of your own, as free men and women. You just need to tell us where they've taken the boy."

"You are wasting your time," the dark-haired man said mechanically, his hollow, emotionless eyes flicking briefly to Tony. Tony stared right back, hoping that his expression accurately portrayed the dangerous, threatening, uncontrollable fury he was so close to unleashing.

*You don't want to test me, you son of a bitch.*

“No,” Natasha replied. “We aren’t. *You* are. You realise that the game is up for you, I hope? We’d never let you return to HYDRA, and even if you somehow managed to escape, we’d follow you there and take down the base ourselves. You’d be killed for treason, whether you meant to give up the location or not.”

“We will not be committing treason,” said the second man, just as robotically as the other two soldiers.

“No? Well, then, you have two options left,” said Natasha. “A lifelong sentence in prison, or an exchange of information for a fresh start. A shorter sentence, and, potentially, a free life.”

“No,” the first man said. “That is where you are wrong. Cut off one head, two more shall take its place.”

Tony realised what was going to happen a second before it did, but once again, he was too late to do anything. As his heart dropped to the floor, he barely had time to cry out, “No!” before the Winter Soldiers made a chomping motion as one and immediately started seizing.

“Bruce,” Tony said, barely hearing himself, “you have a medicine for cyanide poisoning, right? Bruce?” He turned to the man, but Bruce just shook his head, his eyes fixed in horror on the Winter Soldiers, who had started to froth at their mouths.

“Bruce, come on, you’ve got them down in the Med Bay, I know you do,” Tony tried again, not even caring that he was flat-out pleading now.

“Tony,” Bruce said softly, “look at them.” He gestured to the soldiers, now blue in the face, and shook his head again. “Those were lethal doses, even for an enhanced individual. It’s too late.”

It felt as though the floor was completely dropping out from him, but he was paralysed. Rooted to the spot, frozen and unable to do anything as he watched the three Winter Soldiers, the closest thing they’d had to a lead in finding Peter, convulse slowly to death.

“Hail HYDRA,” the dark-haired man murmured faintly, before going still. Not a second later, his acquaintances joined him.

And just like that, it was over. The one tiny glimmer of hope, the one lifeline throughout this nightmarish day was gone, and Tony was left drowning in the treacherous waters. Helpless and alone and terrified and furious.

He’d never felt this way before. He didn’t think it was possible to feel so many things at once, to such an extreme level. A part of him was slightly scared, because he could *feel* the way the anger and terror and panic and guilt combined into one unstoppable force of power, and suddenly the floodgates that had been barely restraining everything he’d been working to suppress couldn’t reign it in any longer. They burst open, and all semblance of control vanished.

“Well, this is just perfect,” Tony said viciously. “Yeah, this is just what we need. The combined suicide of our *only goddamned leads* in this whole mess, yeah, that’s fantastic. Couldn’t have worked out better.”

“Tony,” Natasha said quietly, “we’ll figure something out.”

“Like *what*, Nat?” Tony snarled suddenly, rounding on her. “Please, give me one solid example of something we can figure out, because I don’t know about you, but it’s looking pretty hopeless to

me.”

“Just calm down, Tony,” Steve cut in. “I know this is bad, but-”

“No, don’t you *dare*, Cap!” Tony yelled, and even to himself he sounded slightly unhinged. “Don’t even *try* to tell me to calm down, don’t tell me that we can make this better, because we can’t, we fucking *can’t*. Peter’s gone and none of us have a damn clue where he is, so don’t even *think* about telling me to calm down!”

“Hey, back off,” Sam spoke up. “Don’t come at Steve, he’s just trying to help.”

“Yeah, you all seem to be doing a *great* job of that,” Tony snarled. “Trying to help, and just making things worse. Tell me, whose genius idea was it to strap these lovely soldiers up without patting them down for weapons first? Who was the brilliant soul who forgot to check them for cyanide pills, huh?”

“Okay, that’s not helping,” Clint shot back, sounding angry now. “You didn’t think to check for cyanide either, Tony, don’t put this on us.”

“I’m not the one who dealt with them!” Tony all but screamed, and he knew he was being irrational, he was perfectly aware of the terrible hypocrisy of his own statements, but something within him had broken and he couldn’t stop. It was like all of the terrible, monstrous guilt that had been eating away at him was finally being unleashed, because it was easier to blame others than to blame yourself. That was just how selfish asses like Tony worked. “I was a little preoccupied trying to *find the HYDRA base that stole Peter!* So excuse me for the error!”

“So were we!” Sam yelled back. “You act like you’re the only one who cares about Peter, Tony, but you’re not! All of us want him back too, you’re not the only one who’s scared shitless about what’s happening to him, we just deal with it better than you-”

“*He’s my kid!*” Tony roared, so loudly he thought his lungs might tear. “He’s my kid, and now he’s gone and we can’t find him and we probably never will and I - I don’t know - I can’t-” Words completely failing him now, Tony gave up on all attempts of coherent speech, and something seemed to completely deflate inside of him as he did so. All the uncontrollable fury, all the righteous anger that had been wreaking havoc inside of him only moments ago transformed into something else - a ball of some unidentifiable emotion, building up in his throat.

“Tony, it’s okay,” Bruce said to him, walking over and grabbing his shoulders. “It’s okay, you’re just scared. We are too. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Tony all but whispered. “It’s not, it’s not okay, it’s not-”

Something very, very strange was happening. His throat was becoming tight and constricted, stinging painfully with every passing second. His eyes were stinging. Moisture was building up in them. God - were those *tears* ?

“Come here,” Bruce murmured, and he pulled Tony into a tight embrace. And just like that, the words came tumbling out.

“It’s me,” Tony finally admitted, voicing aloud the thoughts that had been plaguing him since the press conference. “It’s my fault. It’s me. I couldn’t save him. I’m sorry.”

And as Bruce continued to hold him, and the rest of the Avengers stood around him in solemn silence, Tony did something that he hadn’t done in years.

He cried.

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When Peter woke up again, he wasn't strapped to the stupid metal chair. Instead, his chin was resting on his chest and his arms were stretched overhead as he slumped against a pole, joints screaming because they'd been holding up his entire weight for however long he'd been out. His broken collarbone and ribs were really not fond of that position either, and he had to stifle a scream of pain as he came to. It took his sluggish brain a shameful amount of time to realise that that the pole that he was currently relying on to remain in an upright position was the same one he'd seen earlier from the chair. So they'd kept him in the same room, but moved him to a different position. Why?

He slowly cracked open his eyes and winced at the sight of his ruined torso and track pants. His handler had really done a number on his chest, and it hurt every time he moved. It was crisscrossed with so many cuts of varying length and depth - it was frightening to see his own body sliced up like a piece of meat - and the blood had trailed down onto his track pants, staining the soft, grey fabric a rusty red colour. That was a shame, he'd liked those pants.

His face felt swollen from the beating that the bad Winter Soldier had given him. His jaw was aching terribly and he could feel blood sluggishly dripping from his nose, down his chin and onto his chest, where it mixed with the blood that had already dried there from the gruesome cuts. Hopefully, the fact that the blood was still flowing from his nose meant that he hadn't been out too long. He was pretty sure he had a split lip and there was definitely a black eye or two forming, if the aching throb was anything to go by.

On top of that, he felt *dirty*. He'd been stuck with HYDRA for god-knew how long, without even being hosed down. He'd vomited on himself, twice, thanks to the ever-so-gentle process of having his memories prodded and probed, and had probably produced enough sweat to fill the Nile River. He was weak, starving, thirsty and in a shit-ton of pain. All of that combined meant that his enhanced healing wouldn't work, which meant he'd still be in a shit-ton of pain for a long time to come. He was just altogether not having a good time.

When his handler walked in, followed by Mousy, who was holding a big-ass whip like it would poison him, Peter realised he'd soon be having an even worse time as the reason he was attached to a pole became clear. The pair approached him, his handler grinning devilishly while Mousy appeared to be sweating nervously and shaking minutely. His face was pale and he was clenching his jaw so hard that Peter wouldn't be surprised if one of his teeth shattered. The poor guy looked like he was having an even worse time than Peter was - no mean feat.

"Nice to see you, gentlemen," Peter croaked, clearing his throat when the words came out as nothing more than a pained rasp. He was *so* thirsty.

"Asset, how are you?"

"Well, if I had some iced tea this would practically be a holiday!"

"Is that so? You know, you seemed so confident in your precious Avengers, but it's been three days and I haven't seen hide nor hair of them. I'm starting to wonder if they're coming at all," his handler smirked slyly.

Peter balked. Had it really been that long? There were no windows in the weird torture room, so he had no way to track the days, and he'd been unconscious for what felt like centuries, which meant he was missing a significant chunk of time in his memories, a chunk of time that he immediately wanted back. He had no way other way to know if his handler was telling the truth, or just messing with him to get inside his head.

Not knowing things was something that Peter actively tried to avoid. He'd spent twelve years with HYDRA, and during that time he was only told the bare essentials, so once he was free he'd done his best to avoid another situation where he didn't know what was happening - something that sounded a lot easier than it actually was, considering he'd been deprived of a normal childhood and regular updates of the events of the world. On the academic side of things, knowing things was something he could do quite well, having being crowned a mini-genius by Tony.

However, now he didn't even know what day it was, let alone when the Avengers were coming, or how he'd get out of here if they never came at all.

His handler smirked, obviously garnering a win from his silence. "So, now that you know they've abandoned you, are you ready to answer our questions?"

"Sorry, dickface, the answer is still no."

"Very well then, it's not like I don't enjoy hearing you scream."

"Whatever, sicko," Peter huffed, rolling his eyes to mask the mounting terror roiling in his mind as his handler stretched out a hand to Mousy, clearly asking for the whip to be handed over. The boy did it hastily, rushing to obey his superior's orders. Peter remembered a time when he was just the same; willing to do whatever it took to please the higher-ups, regardless of how it grated at his morality.

As the first lash came down, Peter screamed, completely unprepared for the concentrated agony. The lancing fire through his back was so much worse than the cuts, or the vicious beating from an enhanced soldier. He caught sight of spikes sewn into the leather strap as his handler lifted the whip above his head. The older man brought it down with vicious force, and Peter swore loudly as the spikes ripped into his skin. It felt like every atom in his body was being torn apart by a cold-hearted giant.

The lashes not only sent waves of pain through his back, but through the rest of his body as well. As strike number four came down, right across his shoulder blades, he felt the agony travel up to his shoulders as well. As lash number too-many-to-count hit home, just above his hips, his legs trembled at the pain that passed through them as well. He was sure there was blood running down his back, could feel it sliding across his torn skin and soaking into his track pants.

It was agony, and not for the first time he just wished he could be home, lying in the living room with the rest of the Avengers, cuddled up on the couch next to Tony while the man ran a hand through his hair, watching a random Disney movie.

After a long time - *far too long* - the lashings slowed to a stop. Peter was slumped against the pole, his legs no longer strong enough to hold his diminishing weight; going three days (possibly) with an enhanced metabolism to satiate and a severe lack of things to satiate it with was sure to do that. The agonising mess of his destroyed back made every position painful, so he settled for the one that gave his fatigued limbs a break. His muscles were exhausted from clenching in preparation every time his ears picked up the *whoosh* of the whip flying through the air.

Peter could hear his handler's panting breaths and saw his wildly invigorated face as the man spun

him around to face him, twisting his arms painfully and forcing a cry out of Peter's throat. It came out as nothing more than a croak, because the hours of screams and shouts had reduced his vocal chords to nothing.

Mousy was staring straight at Peter, looking like he was about to be sick and visibly swallowed when they made eye contact. Peter decided to try a different tactic. He'd been taught to always go for the weak link, after all. "What are you looking at, mouse-boy? Wanna trade places?"

Mousy's eyes widened, scrabbling back as Peter addressed him directly. His HYDRA uniform was a little too big for him, hanging off his frame slightly.

"Do not engage," his handler hissed, head flicking back to where Mousy was pressed against the wall in his effort to get away from Peter.

Peter just smirked, eyes tinted with pain as he tried to keep up the cocky facade he'd created for himself. Why, oh why, had he chosen that attitude? Couldn't he have just emulated a sullen teenager - speaking only in grunts and monotonous syllables? That would have required a lot less energy to keep up.

"I think the scientist up in the labs will quite enjoy the next thing we have lined up for you. You seem to have quite a set of lungs on you, and they've been chomping at the bit to figure out how long our Spider can hold his breath for," his handler growled threateningly, moving Peter's gaze from Mousy to himself.

"Oh, goodie! I love swimming."

"Not after this you won't, Asset. Go fetch the tub, agent."

"Yeah, go get it! I've been meaning to wash my hair for a while now," Peter jeered as Mousy scuttled off to get - what Peter assumed was - the waterboarding tub. He didn't know of any other kind of water-based torture that involved holding his breath. He felt a little bit bad for being so mean to poor Mousy. If Peter was right, the guy had been coerced into joining HYDRA through some presumably barbaric method, which meant he didn't want to watch the Fifty Shades Of Torture Peter was going through and therefore didn't deserve the mind games Peter was currently playing.

Peter just needed to get out, and the poor, timid, mouse-like boy was his best bet. If it had truly been three days, Peter needed to face the truth; the Avengers probably weren't coming to save him. They'd decided he just wasn't worth the risk, wasn't worth the resources, wasn't worth the time. *He just wasn't worth it*. And why would they come? He was a traumatised teenager with no real value - all he did was disturb people's sleep with his nightmares and annoy them by day with his panic attacks.

Maybe he'd been misreading everything all along. Maybe the 'fond eye roll' Sam had done at one of Peter's crappy puns was really one of annoyance. Maybe the way Clint vigorously ruffled his hair was actually a ploy to push him a little further out of his personal bubble, because he just couldn't *bear* to be near him. Maybe the reason Thor fed him so many pop-tarts was because he was secretly hoping Peter would choke. Maybe Natasha only wanted to spar with him so that she'd be allowed to punch him. Maybe Bruce like to read in silence with Peter because it meant he wouldn't have to listen to his annoying voice. Maybe the reason Tony had given him his own bench in the workshop was because he didn't want to be within a close proximity of him, didn't want all of Peter's iffy qualities tainting his happy place.

Then again, maybe the Avengers were taking their time with the planning. Ironing out every detail

to make it perfect so there was no chance of a screw-up. Maybe they were all wrecks, saddened, devastated even, by his kidnapping. But that was all wishful thinking, really, born of hope that wasn't going to last. Peter had learnt long ago that hope was a pointlessly destructive thing. It could keep people going for much longer than they would have otherwise, but if their hopes didn't become reality, it hurt that much more to accept defeat.

That was why, when Mousy came hurrying back in with a tub of water, sloshing it everywhere as he went - much to his handler's displeasure - Peter didn't come up with a snarky comment. He just let his chin hang on his chest, kept his eye down, and put as much weight on his feet as possible. He'd always wanted to die with dignity, with his head held high and his shoulders back, but right now, he was just too tired. If he did die - and he was sure that would happen soon, unless... no, he wouldn't allow himself to go down that path - it would not be a dignified affair. The world was far too cruel for that. It wouldn't allow him a satisfying death, not even after all it had done to him.

His handler removed the cuffs from the pole and lowered his arms until they were behind his back. The new position hurt his collarbone even more, and his muscles were probably about two seconds away from revolting against him, but at least his weight was off his arms and his numerous cuts and gashes weren't being stretched out anymore.

Peter was forced into a kneeling position in front of the tub, and he stared into the clear liquid. It looked so harmless, but he knew that soon it would be stealing his breath from him, and maybe even his life if his handler was vindictive enough - and Peter had no doubt he was. He caught a glimpse of his reflection on the surface. What he saw was a broken boy; bruised and beaten within an inch of his life, covered in blood and sweat, greasy hair hanging limp over his forehead and dangling into his eyes.

He needed a haircut. It was a strange thought to have as he peered at his possible end - death by water, how mundane. Peter had always thought he'd go out in a fiery explosion, or maybe a barrage of gunfire, or, more recently, saving someone he loved. Instead he'd die by hydrogen dioxide. How so very boring - but nevertheless, it was the one rattling around his skull.

His handler grabbed the back of his head, twisting his curly locks in a clawed fist, and shoved his face into the water. Peter didn't even have time to suck in a breath.

He managed to remain calm for the first minute, but by the second his lungs were burning and the heavy silence of the water was deafening to his ears. By the third, he'd started to jerk and shake - he knew it was stupid, that it wasted precious oxygen, but it was like his muscles had a mind of their own. He was too weak to get rid of the hand holding his head down, but he kept bucking and pulling anyway.

Too weak.

Too weak.

Too weak.

Suddenly, there was air - not fresh or clean or nice-smelling in anyway, but *there* and *breathable* and therefore so, so sweet. He sucked in great lungfuls, gulping it down like he'd never breathed before in his life. Water dripped into his eyes from his hair, and onto his chest and back, stinging the open wounds which were probably in desperate need of some disinfectant, but he didn't care. He was too busy breathing in the *air*.

There was so much of it. He thought of every breath he'd taken before now, knowing that he'd never treasured them as he should have, never savoured each one like the miracle it was.

He'd read once that you don't appreciate something until it's gone. He could now say, without a shadow of a doubt, that that was the truth.

Before his breathing had slowed to a normal pace again, however, his head was being shoved back underwater, and he started thrashing immediately this time. He wasn't ready to say goodbye to the air - he *needed* it.

No matter how accepting he was of death, he didn't *want* it to happen. He wanted to look up at night and see the stars, or watch the sun rise at the beginning of the day. He wanted to smell fresh pancakes in the morning, upon waking up at the Tower, or the cologne and motor oil scent that seemed to follow Tony wherever he went. He wanted to finish the *Harry Potter* series and maybe even go to school. He wanted so many things that only life could provide.

Yet, as he watched the silvery bubbles rise to the surface, wishing so desperately that he could do the same, and he felt the haze of unconsciousness start to creep in from behind, Peter wondered if that would ever happen. Life had never given him what he'd desperately longed for before, so why should that pattern change now?

His vision faded to black, and his struggling stopped.

Peter, for the first time in a long time, was still and silent.

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Tony didn't sleep. How could he, with the terrible thoughts that circulated around his mind? The dark whispers followed him everywhere, a constant reminder of what had happened, what *was* happening, and, most terrifyingly of all, what was *going* to happen. There was no escape.

Time passed. He wasn't sure how long. It could have been hours, it could have been days. It could have been months. But time went on, and as it did, Tony worked relentlessly.

He spent day and night holed up in his workshop, huddled in front of his various computer screens as he murmured to FRIDAY in a low voice, breaking through countless firewalls and security systems as he searched for any indicator of the whereabouts of the HYDRA base where Peter had been taken. But it seemed that the harder he tried, the more successful the information was in eluding him.

After his more-than-slightly embarrassing breakdown in front of the Avengers after the Winter Soldier interrogation, the team had mostly left him to his own devices, contributing ideas and conducting searches in their own right but never actively collaborating with him. For this, Tony was grateful; although his teenage-like mood swings seemed to have settled down somewhat since his outburst, they were still unpredictable, and anyone who stayed in an enclosed space with him for too long risked getting in the firing line of one of Tony's hurled pens or water glasses. (The object in question changed every time this happened; it really just depended on what was closest to his hand at the time of his sudden furious impulses.) The guilt was still there, as well, and didn't appear to be going away anytime soon, but Tony managed to keep it under control by busying himself with his work, losing his mind in the repetitive task of hacking system after system and just altogether ignoring the basic human need for sleep.

After two days and two nights of this (FRIDAY had ended up informing him of the time frame,

once it became clear that Tony could barely remember what day of the week it was), Bruce came to Tony's workshop to let him know that Pepper had woken up from her concussion-induced state of unconsciousness.

"She's been out of it for a while, but I think she's almost back to herself now," he informed Tony. "You can come see her, if you want. Just be careful with her."

The tension in Tony's shoulders, which had turned into an ever-present companion now, loosened slightly. If there was one person he wanted to speak to right now, it was Pepper Potts. Feeling slightly less stressed than he had only moments before, Tony abandoned his workshop and followed Bruce into the Med Bay.

"She's in there," Bruce said, nodding towards an open door before giving Tony a supportive pat on the arm. "I'll leave you to it."

Tony nodded, far too emotionally exhausted to be bothered with constructing a verbal response. As Bruce turned and left the Med Bay, Tony swallowed and stepped through the open doorway, entering into a room containing a white bed next to a heart monitor. It was in this bed that Pepper lay, her arm hooked up to an IV that led to the machine. Her eyes widened in surprise as they landed on Tony.

"Hey, Pep," Tony muttered, and throwing Bruce's advice to the wind, he all but threw himself towards the bed, pulling up a chair and leaning in to kiss her. Pepper's initial response was shock, but after a few moments she recovered and returned the kiss, winding her arms around Tony's neck as she did so. When they finally broke apart, she raised her eyebrows accusingly at Tony.

"That was very forceful," she pointed out, a hint of a smile on her lips. "Didn't Bruce give you the rundown on not over-exciting his patient?"

"He did," Tony confessed, rubbing his neck, "but since when do I listen to Bruce?"

"That's true."

God, he'd needed this. He'd been so caught up in worrying about Peter that he'd forgotten about the one person who could make him feel just a little bit better. Already, Tony could feel the magic of Pepper Potts taking place; he felt lighter, like a tiny bit of the suffocating burden had been lifted off his shoulders. It wasn't enough to calm him down entirely, not by a long shot, but it was *something*, and it would have to do for now.

"I take it that this sudden display of affection isn't just out of the blue?" Pepper asked him knowingly, propping herself up against her pillows.

"What are you talking about? I'm always affectionate. It's one of my most attractive qualities."

Pepper just sighed, looking at him with those perceptive eyes of hers. "Tony. I'm not stupid."

Tony deflated, caving as he leaned back in his chair and scrubbed a hand over his face. He couldn't avoid the topic any longer; he'd never been very good at keeping things from Pepper. "Yeah, unfortunately. I know. What do you remember?"

Pepper hesitated for a moment, considering her answer. "I remember...an attack. Explosions. The Tower was destroyed."

"Yeah, we haven't got around to fixing it yet."

“What?” Pepper frowned at him. “How long has it been?”

“Three days,” Tony replied, “but we’ve been ...preoccupied.”

*As in, I’ve been losing my mind worrying about where Peter is and what’s happening to him and whether he’s even alive, which I really, really hope he is, not to mention having screaming fests with the rest of the team and taking out all my guilt issues on them. But still, fun times.*

It took all of Tony’s self-control not to voice this statement, but as it turned out, this would have been unnecessary anyway. Pepper had always been particularly observant, especially when it came to Tony’s mannerisms, and it only took her about five seconds to piece it all together.

“Tony,” she said softly, concern creasing her features, “what happened?”

Tony hesitated. To say it aloud would bring back all the haunting thoughts, all the terrifying, inescapable considerations of what might be happening to Peter, if there was even a Peter left for things to be happening to. The very notion of his caused his stomach to churn sickeningly and his chest to tighten painfully, threatening a panic attack, and he hurriedly swallowed away the thought.

Peter couldn’t be dead. Not yet. HYDRA surely still had other uses for him.

*Like torture.*

It wasn’t a very comforting thought.

“HYDRA came,” Tony blurted suddenly, unable to keep it in any longer. “They were the ones who attacked the Tower, while the press conference was happening. They broke in and took out you, as well as Wanda, Vision, and Bucky, and then they...they...”

A lump suddenly formed in his throat, rendering all attempts at speech useless. Luckily, Pepper had already figured it out. She was the one who’d been taking care of the kid that day, after all.

“Peter,” she whispered. “They took him, didn’t they?”

Tony nodded, wincing at the sharp bolt of pain that ran through his chest at these words; hearing it spoken aloud so suddenly was not something he was emotionally equipped to deal with, by any means. Still, it was marginally better than having to break the news himself, he supposed.

“Oh, Tony,” Pepper said, real sadness taking over her face now. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too,” Tony muttered. “It’s - Pep, it’s killing me. I just can’t stop thinking, what if I’d been there? What if we hadn’t all gone to that stupid, *useless* press conference? If we hadn’t been so busy worrying about the goddamned UN and their Accords shit, we might’ve been at the Tower when it happened. I might have been able to do something.”

“You’re blaming yourself for something that was completely out of your control?” Pepper asked sceptically, regarding Tony with a calm expression. “Tony, for a supposed genius, you can be a bit of an idiot sometimes.”

Tony grinned shakily at this. “Got anything new to say to me, Pep? I feel like that’s always your go-to insult. Kind of gets a little old when it’s all you ever hear.”

“Well, I do find immense satisfaction in seeing your ego deflate, even just a little,” Pepper smiled back. She paused, and Tony watched in anticipation as her features turned solemn again. “Seriously though, Tony, you’ve got to stop with this whole *it’s-my-fault* thing when it comes to Peter. Were

you the HYDRA agents that attacked the Tower and captured him?”

“Seriously, Pepper?” Tony huffed. “What kind of a question is that?”

But Pepper wouldn’t back down. “Well? Were you?”

Tony sighed, running a hand through his hair and cursing Pepper Potts’ stubbornness into oblivion. She had him cornered, and he was far too stressed out to formulate a witty dodge.

“No,” he admitted begrudgingly. “No, I wasn’t.”

“Well then, how is any of this your fault?” Pepper replied matter-of-factly.

“I already told you,” Tony said, a note of desperation creeping into his tone. “I should have been there, I should have predicted HYDRA would come, *especially* after the whole fiasco with the paps’ sighting of Peter-”

“Tony, what are you, a psychic?” Pepper cut in. “How on earth would you have been able to accurately predict that? You’d have to spend every waking hour of every day on guard, waiting for the moment when HYDRA would strike. You have a life to live, Tony.”

Tony sighed, burying his face in his hands. The problem was, he knew that what Pepper was saying made sense; they were all logical, valid arguments, ones that, if the situation had been reversed, *he* would have used against her. But the situation wasn’t reversed, and when it came to himself, all of Tony’s self-proclaimed logic and deductive reasoning seemed to fly out the window.

“You have to drop this, right now,” Pepper continued, and her voice was so harsh, so blunt, that Tony glanced up from his hands. “I’m serious. This whole guilty superhero act? Not working for me, Tony. And *especially* not for you. You can’t function like this - all mopey and depressed and hating yourself. First of all, your ego can’t handle it. And second of all, you have no chance of finding Peter, or contributing anything remotely helpful to the case, if you’re not in the right headspace. So pull yourself together, stop blaming yourself for things that you have no power over, and start using some of that brain that you’re so famous for.”

Tony stared at her for a long moment, Pepper’s harsh words echoing around inside his brain. A part of him was tempted to ignore her, or even argue against what she was saying, but for the first time in the past few days, the rational side of his brain won out. Tony couldn’t argue with Pepper, because she was *right*. As difficult as it was for him to admit, Tony *had* been acting illogically. And maybe some part of him had even been consciously aware of this, although if that was the case, it had been far too insignificant to do anything about it. But he was aware of it now. And though the guilt wasn’t completely gone - Tony didn’t think it ever would - it was subdued somewhat, replaced by something else entirely

A newfound motivation.

Feeling as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Tony offered Pepper a smirk. “Nice speech. My only criticism? Sounds a little forced. Like you rehearsed it a few times, in fact.”

“Yes, that would make sense,” Pepper agreed, “except for the fact that I’ve been unconscious for the past three days, unable to do anything except endure what felt like an endless tape of nightmares.”

“Nightmares?” Tony repeated, surprised. “While you were unconscious? What about?”

Pepper shrugged tiredly. “I knew something had gone wrong at the Tower before I went out. To be

honest, I thought it was *you* who'd been captured - and the rest of the team, maybe, as well. Seeing you dead over and over in my dreams isn't something I want to repeat, let me tell you." She shuddered involuntarily.

"Ouch. That sounds rough," Tony agreed. "Maybe if you'd woken up sooner, the nightmares wouldn't have been-"

He broke off suddenly, the breath abruptly knocked out of him.

"Tony?" Pepper asked, frowning at him. "What's wrong?"

Tony didn't respond. He couldn't. He was frozen. All he could do was relish in the epiphany that had just hit him like a truck.

He'd been acting exactly as HYDRA would expect Tony to act - scared, angry, depressed. And thus, it had clouded his judgement. He'd been so focused on the impossible task of finding Peter, on worrying about the lack of resources available to do so, that he'd completely forgotten to use the resources right before his eyes.

Namely - *the nightmare detector programme*.

The software which he'd programmed within FRIDAY to detect when Peter's heart rate spurred erratically. The software which had been designed by him, and would therefore function normally no matter the distance between him and Peter. The software which he could easily reprogramme to track Peter's whereabouts, too, because if nothing else, surely Peter being relentlessly tortured was going to cause an erratic spur in his heart rate-

"Pepper," Tony murmured distractedly, "I love you, but I have to go."

"What - Tony!" Pepper cried, as he jumped up from his chair and made a beeline for the door. "What's going on? What are you - *Tony*?"

"I'll explain later," Tony called, exiting the room. "Let's just say I've awakened my inner genius!"

And with that, he all but sprinted down the hallway and into the elevator, already making a plan to assemble the team and inform them of this new development - the first real development they'd had since Peter was taken. The first step in the right direction.

And despite himself, despite the fact that Peter remained captured, despite the fact that it was still just a plan and hadn't even been set in motion yet, Tony couldn't help but feel a spark of real, true hope.

He was going to get his kid back.

## Chapter End Notes

A glimmer of hope is on the horizon...the question is, will it turn into a happily ever after? Or is there still a LOT more to come? You'll have to wait and see \*evil grin\*



# Table For One In The Torture House

## Chapter Notes

Hello everyone and welcome back to Itsy Bitsy Spider. This chapter we have a lot of fun and torture scenes that-

Someone needs to stop me.

Anyway this is chapter twelve I think and it was originally gonna be like, 20,900 words or something but then we decided that was a bit much and split it in half. You're welcome.

Chapter thirteen will be a direct continuation of this chapter.

In other news, I'm back from overseas meaning updates will be a lot more regular.

Yay!

So we hope you enjoy this chapter, have fun reading :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Getting his kid back turned out to be an extremely painful process. Painful in that it required time, and effort, and patience. Three things that Tony rarely possessed on a regular day, let alone during crises such as the one he was currently experiencing.

Still, he wasn't Tony Stark for nothing, and he would be damned if he wasn't going to do absolutely everything within his power to free Peter from HYDRA's sick, twisted clutches.

"Tony, slow down."

Right, of course. The meeting. The meeting with the Avengers that he was currently a participant of, in which he was supposed to be explaining his mind blowing Einstein-worthy plan to rescue Peter.

"Not all of us are tech gurus," Steve was saying. "Particularly the more elderly of the group. Can you take it from the top, speaking English this time?"

Tony sighed, running a frustrated hand through his hair. He wanted nothing more than to lock himself away in his workshop and hack FRIDAY's systems to track Peter down *right this instant*, but the problem was, he knew he needed the team behind him in order for his plan to work. As loath as he was to admit it, Tony couldn't take down a fully secured HYDRA base on his own, which meant that, unfortunately, valuable time was going to have to be wasted dumbing down his plan to the technologically challenged of the group.

"Okay, so the rundown is," he began, struggling not to let the internal frustration leak into his tone, "I used FRIDAY, my AI, to make this system to detect Peter's nightmares. He'd been having a lot of them lately, basically nonstop since the first attack on the Tower, so I developed a monitor that would track any erratic jumps or spikes in his heart rate, which would obviously indicate that Peter was experiencing a nightmare."

"Um, sorry what?" Clint asked incredulously, mild curiosity crossing his features. "You just, what, jammed a tracker into the kid? Shoved a needle into his arm, no medical knowledge required?"

*Oh, for fuck's sake.* Tony shot Clint his most rage-infused glare, his frustration increasing ten

times over. “Does that really matter, Barton? If you wanted a full crash course on the ins and outs of nanotech, be sure to book a session with me later, okay? The point is, I can use the system to find Peter.”

“How?” Steve questioned, arms folded.

Tony swallowed, willing what little patience he had left to last for the next five minutes. “I can hack the system, turn it into a tracking device. It would only work if Peter’s heart rate happened to be elevated at the time, but considering where he is, I figure that’s bound to happen at regular intervals, because, you know...”

“The torture,” Natasha finished for him, her eyes softening as she watched Tony.

Tony winced, a sharp bolt of pain running through him at Natasha’s words, but nodded nonetheless. “Exactly.”

“Torture?” Thor repeated, frowning slightly.

*I swear to God-*

“Yes, *torture*, Thor,” Tony reinforced viciously. “You know, that thing that evil villains like to dish out in large quantities to innocent teenage kids for no apparent reason except that they’re *fucking psychopaths-*”

“Hey, Tony,” Bruce interrupted, frowning at him worriedly. “Deep breaths. You gotta relax.”

Tony exhaled slowly, expending every ounce of his self-control to prevent himself from screaming in frustration. He couldn’t help it; every second that passed by was another second wasted, and Tony hated the feeling of not doing anything, of being fully capable to take action yet taking none anyway. He couldn’t stand the thought of what would happen if-

But no. He wasn’t thinking about that. He wasn’t even considering it.

*Gotta stay focused.*

“Okay,” Tony continued, with an air of forced calm. “Anyway. Point is, I can find Peter’s location, which will no doubt be in an extremely well-protected HYDRA base. Which we are then gonna have to infiltrate.”

“I have some experience in that area,” Steve spoke up.

*Finally, something you actually can do.*

“Well, no time like the present to spill the beans, Cap.”

Steve frowned, drumming his fingers on the table in deep thought. “Every HYDRA base I’ve ever seen has been underground. They work best under the surface. It gives them unlimited space to build up their supply of weapons.”

“Which will be extensive, and basically unbeatable,” Bucky put in. “If it’s anything like the base where I was kept, they’ll have basically impenetrable security. A bunch of outside shields, all manner of fortifications, not to mention the countless bombs and lines of defence you’ll meet if you even manage to set one foot inside. I’m sorry, Tony, but even if you find Peter’s location, I don’t see how we’ll be able to get in.”

Tony swallowed, trying desperately to ignore the horrible sinking feeling in his gut that accompanied Bucky's statement.

"No," he said lamely. "No, there's gotta be a way...there's gotta be..."

"There might be one," Vision put in quietly.

All heads at the table swivelled towards Vision. Like Bucky, Wanda and Pepper had only recently woken up from their HYDRA-induced unconsciousness, and if Tony was being honest, he hadn't expected helpful advice from any of them. He struggled to keep his hopes down, reminding himself that whatever Vision's idea was, it probably wouldn't be enough...

"We still have the HYDRA agents," Vision went on. "The ones you interrogated, remember?"

"Yeah, the same HYDRA agents that killed themselves two days ago?" Sam asked bluntly.

Vision shrugged mildly. "Whether they're dead or alive, it makes no difference. The point is, we have their weapons. Their uniforms. And more importantly - *their faces*."

*Well, shit. He turned out to be smarter than I planned.*

"That...that actually makes sense," Tony said, talking slowly to conceal the growing excitement that Vision had planted within him, a seed of hope. "If we run scans over their faces, I can easily create an almost-perfect replica of what they looked like before they took the cyanide. It'll take a little re-coding, but with some work...I reckon I can digitalise them, upload an imprint onto a facial scanner, and re-boot the system to morph collectively-"

"*English*, Tony," Steve broke in again.

Tony let out a groan of frustration, burying his face in his hands and battling the not-so-unfamiliar urge to, once again, punch Steve in the face. Mercifully, Bruce came to his rescue.

"He can make us look like them," the scientist realised. "With a sort of digital facial mask. Three of us can, effectively, turn into the HYDRA agents."

There was a silence as everyone digested this. It was Natasha, finally, who spoke first.

"How long will it take?"

Tony shrugged. "I don't have an exact number, but I'd say an hour to design, then about half a day to generate. In other words, it'll be ready by tomorrow."

"But will it even guarantee our entry?" Natasha asked. "Will the disguise be enough?"

"It should be," Bucky put in. "HYDRA uses retinal scanners for pretty much everything. Instead of trying to blow the base to bits to get in, we just have to find the secret entrance and shove our eye at whatever device they're using to grant access."

Natasha nodded slowly, an intense expression crossing her features. It was an expression that Tony was well familiarised with - the face Natasha wore whenever she was formulating a plan.

"Alright," she said, weighing each word carefully. "Okay. This might actually work. In that time, Bucky and Steve can fill the rest of us in on the ins and outs of the HYDRA bases. Anything you guys know, I don't care how unimportant you think it is, you tell us. Doesn't matter whether it's the location of their secret bomb supply or the cafeteria - if it's to do with HYDRA, I want to know

about it.”

“But only three of us will actually be able to enter the base, once these mask things are ready,” Rhodey pointed out. “What’s the plan once they get in there?”

“They secure their positions, play the part of your average HYDRA agent,” Bucky spoke up. “But it won’t last long. The faces we’re taking, they’re Winter Soldiers. Like me and Peter. They essentially have no power within the HYDRA hierarchy.”

“So once they get in there, they’ll be taken to be brainwashed again?” Wanda realised. “That’s not going to work at all.”

“Unless they don’t stay as the Winter Soldiers once they’re in,” Steve pointed out. “These Winter Soldiers aren’t the same as Bucky or Peter. None of them have ever resisted their brainwashing, if the whole cyanide act was anything to go by, so surely HYDRA won’t have them on their radar.”

“They’ll still be monitored heavily,” Bucky said quietly. “If you’re talking about overpowering HYDRA’s other agents, it’s not that easy.”

An idea suddenly occurred to Tony. “But we have one advantage,” he realised quickly. “They don’t know we’re not the actual Winter Soldiers. We could come in equipped with all kinds of my tech, smuggle it in our uniforms, and they’d never suspect a thing.”

“Does any of your tech allow you to silently take out one HYDRA agent, without raising suspicion?” Bucky asked. “Because that’s usually what happens. The Soldier gets escorted around by one agent, called the handler, and they’re basically responsible for keeping them in line. They’re each with a Soldier pretty much 24/7. If you take those guys out, it leaves a lot more room to move freely. You can steal their masks, put them on to cover your face, effectively covering the fact that you look like a Winter Soldier whilst at the same time giving the appearance of a handler status.”

“You’re only asking me for some tech that can knock people out in silence?” Tony asked, eyebrows raised in disbelief. “Is that even a question, Barnes? Say no more - I’ve got us covered.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Steve said. “Three of us go in disguised as the Winter Soldiers, whilst smuggling some of Tony’s tech in, which we then use to take out our designated handlers. We put their masks on, and then somehow work on getting the rest of the team in?”

“I can help with that,” Bucky said again. Tony hated to admit it, but the guy was turning out to be an extremely valuable asset for this particular rescue mission. “I don’t know everything, but I have a basic understanding of HYDRA’s security systems. I know the stuff you’ve gotta get rid of, at least.”

“Whatever it is, I can most likely get past their firewalls,” Natasha offered determinedly. “I’ve had experience with these kind of organisations before. With Barnes’ advice, I should be able to hack their systems relatively quickly.”

“And once the systems are down, the rest of the team storms in,” Rhodey finished. “We grab Peter and blast our way out of there.”

“And for the most part, ignore the HYDRA agents,” Steve added. “I know it sounds counterintuitive, but this is a rescue mission, not a direct attack. We’re dealing with a short term problem here, and we’re in no way prepared enough to launch a fully-fledged strike against HYDRA. Engaging in combat is not the goal - for now.”

As much as Tony wanted to argue with this - as much as he wanted to burn every last HYDRA agent to nothing but a pile of ash - he couldn't deny that Steve was right. They had to choose their battles, and it was all but impossible to rescue Peter and take down HYDRA at the same time.

"We'll save that for later," he muttered darkly.

"Yes, *later*," Steve emphasised, shooting Tony a warning glance. "Not on this mission. Okay, we need to decide which of us are infiltrating HYDRA first. I think Nat has to go - one of the Soldiers we'll be impersonating is female, and we need you to hack the security systems anyway."

Natasha nodded solemnly. "I'll do it."

"I'm going too," Tony said immediately after. "There's no way I'm being left out of this."

Steve hesitated, biting his lip worriedly as he looked at Tony. "Look, Tony, I know you really care about this mission--"

"*Yes, I do*," Tony grated out, his thoughts darkening as he watched the resolve in Steve's eyes change.

*If he fights me on this, I swear-*

"-but that's exactly the problem," Steve finished determinedly. "I hate to say it, but you're too emotionally involved in this. It might...well...I'm not trying to be a dick here, but it might cloud your judgement a bit."

"No way," Tony growled. "No way do you get to pull that shit on me, Cap. One of us has to find Peter, right? Once we get in there, we've gotta actually locate the kid. I've got the tech, give me twenty minutes and I'll find him. You know I can do it."

"I know you *can*," Steve allowed exasperatedly, "but Tony, no one can deny that you're...angry, to say the least. There's no telling what kind of state you're going to find Peter in, and you won't be able to act immediately, not until Natasha takes down the systems. What if your emotions get the better of you, and you lash out?"

"Jesus Rogers, how do you think I would have survived the last eight godforsaken years if I didn't know how to turn off my emotions?" Tony lashed out, something inside of him snapping because there was *no way in hell* he was going to let this happen. "Emotional incapacitation is literally my brand name. And I'm willing to cooperate with every other aspect of this plan, but over my dead body am I *not* going to be one of the first three going into HYDRA. This whole *not doing anything* strategy we've got going - it's literally *killing* me. And I just-" He broke off suddenly, swallowing past the sudden lump that had arisen in his throat, and tried again, carefully controlling his voice. "I'll be more stressed if I'm sitting on the sidelines. You know that, Rogers. I have to be a part of this. I just have to."

Tony held his eye contact with Steve, not even caring that his speech had steadily deteriorated from furious, intimidating aggression to a pathetic, desperate kind of plea. (Tony Stark, pleading? If the situation wasn't so dire, he would be marvelling at how the tables had turned.) His heart was hammering against his chest, threatening to potentially explode outwards, and all Tony could think was of all the times he and Steve had fought in the past, and how they'd never, ever come to an agreement, and how this was undoubtedly going to be another one of these times, and each minute they wasted arguing was another minute of Peter being relentlessly tortured, or worse-

But Steve, it seemed, had evolved from their days of polarising, endless debates.

“Okay,” he finally said, surprising not only Tony but every other member of the room.

Tony sent a silent prayer of thanks to the relatively good terms he and Steve had come to regarding the Sokovia Accords, because surely nothing else could have persuaded the man to be so lenient. Either way, now was not the time to contemplate this.

“Thanks,” Tony breathed. (He was thanking people now, too? The apocalypse had well and truly begun.) “Thank you. Okay. Uh. So.” Clearing his throat in an attempt to regain at least some of his dignity, Tony folded his arms and redirected the conversation to less dangerous and unexplored territory. “Who else is going?”

“I will,” Steve said, without a moment’s hesitation. “Bucky and I know HYDRA the best, but we can’t risk sending Bucky in again - if you’re recognised, you’ll be subjected to the same fate as Peter, and we’ll be right back where we started.”

“So Bucky will help Natasha and Steve work out where to target the security systems,” Clint summarised. “Tony will find Peter’s location, and get the masks ready.”

“I’m gonna need some help with that,” Tony admitted. “Can’t do both at the same time, it’ll take too long. What do you say, Bruce? Want to help out your science buddy?”

Bruce nodded. “You got it.”

“The rest of the team, help out where you can,” Steve instructed. “Get the HYDRA uniforms ready for use. Prepare all our weapons. We’re gonna need all hands on deck to make this work.”

And as the Avengers all nodded, their expressions identical in hard resolve, Tony couldn’t help but feel, for the first time, at least somewhat in control. He wasn’t calm. Very far from it. But with an actual, tangible course of action looming on the horizon, the panic attack that had been threatening to emerge for so very long was no longer there, replaced instead by an adrenaline-fuelled determination.

“All right,” he announced, standing up from the table. “Let’s get going, people.”

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Darkness was not something that Peter was unfamiliar with - his years with HYDRA had made sure of that, and it had been his companion for many of his early years.

He knew the nothingness that was the darkness of sensory deprivation, thick and suffocating as it seemed to creep down his throat, grabbing his lungs and choking him from the inside out.

He knew the soft darkness of unconsciousness, free from pain and thoughts. Nothing could touch him there.

He knew the ever-changing state that was the darkness of sleep. One moment he’d be at peace, dreaming of a gentle hand resting on his forehead and a melodious voice in his ear. The next second he’d be faced with a boy begging for mercy, blood coating his hands and running down the sink in red rivers as he desperately scrubbed and scrubbed *and scrubbed*, the flash of a gun in shaking hands. Those dreams - or were they memories? - were sharp and painful, filled with the things he’d tried his hardest to forget.

Peter wished for darkness now - *any* type of darkness.

Anything except the bright, fluorescent lights that were probably burned into the space behind his eyelids by now. He's been staring at them for hours. Ever since he'd woken up from the bliss of unconsciousness, fastened to the chair, metal digging into the lashes on his back and inciting pain that he was just too tired to feel.

Peter tried not to be disappointed that he'd actually woken up in the first place.

When he'd passed out in the tub of water, he'd been so sure that that was it, that it was over. Peter had been certain he was going to die feeling nothing except the liquid burning his throat and his handler's nails scratching at his skull as he held Peter's head under the surface.

But then he woke up in the chair, alone in the torture room, still soaking wet and shivering because the room was so cold, and the water drops on his skin were not helping. It had been that way for hours. Peter knew because he'd been counting the seconds, staring at the lights above him that flickered and buzzed occasionally, jolting him out of the trance-like state he'd fallen into.

Normally, that wouldn't be enough to entertain his hyperactive brain, but he was tired. So tired. He barely had the energy to keep his eyes open, but every time he closed them, the image of silvery bubbles of much needed oxygen rising up to the surface flashed behind his eyes, and the sound of his own screams as his handler brought the whip down again and again onto his back rang in his ears.

His wounds weren't healing either. Peter supposed it had something to do with the sleep deprivation, thirst and starvation - Bruce and him had had a conversation about his powers, and what affected them. They'd determined that if he lacked the basic substances humans needed to live, his powers would start to falter, and that included his enhanced healing. That meant he had several bruised - possibly cracked - ribs, a broken collarbone and a busted up face that was healing at *normal-person-speed* - ew. And his torso, which was just - he couldn't even think about that, couldn't think about the pain singing up and down his skin when he moved even an inch. His handler had certainly done a number on it, that was for sure.

He felt like giving up. That was the truth of it, plain and simple. He didn't have a sliver of hope - the chance of the Avengers appearing to save the day decreasing with each second he added to the tally in his head. But, if his days with HYDRA had taught him anything, it was that giving up was *weak*. And Peter may have been a self-deprecating piece of shit, but he vehemently refused to be considered weak, even if he was the only person there to think that of himself.

He needed to pull himself together. He was *the Spider* - feared assassin around the globe. He could resist a spot of torture from the tormentor from his past. No problem.

As if on cue, and exactly 24,716 seconds after he'd started counting, Peter's handler walked in, grinning wickedly and trailed by Mousy, who looked significantly worse for wear. The kid was pale, his nose red and Peter could hear his congested lungs struggling to breathe from his spot in the chair. It sounded like Mousy had come down with a bad cold, which was probably a side effect of living in a, frankly, *fucking freezing* underground base.

"Hello, Asset. How was your rest?"

"Stunning. This is like a five star hotel, honestly. You should start renting rooms out - might give you some extra money so you can finally go through with all of those evil schemes of yours," Peter croaked, his voice sounding broken and painful. That might have had something to do with the whole 'being drowned and then not speaking for almost seven hours' shtick.

“Shut it, brat.”

“Hey, you asked, dumbass. Besides, that is some quality business advice there, you should be *thankful* .”

“I have nothing to thank you for, except the opportunity to get my Spider back. Hopefully you’re broken enough now,” his handler growled, before approaching Peter menacingly.

It took everything within him not to flinch at the sight of the man that would likely haunt his nightmares for years to come - if he ever made it out of here. *No* . He needed to think happy thoughts; sunshine and rainbows and all that. *Tony’s coming* .

To his surprise though, his handler did not hurt him, didn’t slap him or punch him or reveal some vicious torture tool from behind his back. In fact, he reached down and removed the restraints - the stupid restraints that he should have been able to break out of, but couldn’t seem to no matter how hard he tried. Before the thought of escape could even cross Peter’s mind, he was being grabbed. Mousy on one side and his handler on the other, their hands gripping onto his bare arms tight enough to bruise.

His handler’s hands were wide, all encompassing and somehow impossibly dry and unpleasantly clammy at the same time. Mousy’s hands shook violently, though Peter was not sure if it was from fear or sickness. His petite fingers rattled something loose in his mind and there was a flash of slender, manicured hands dancing delicately on a piano. It did not escape Peter that he was in such a bad state that his captors now believed he could be controlled and contained by just an old man and a sick kid.

Nevertheless, Peter tried. He tried his best to plant his heels into the ground, but he was having enough trouble keeping his feet underneath him in the first place. His handler didn’t seem to notice his struggles, feeble as they were, but Mousy shot him a warning look.

“Don’t make this worse for yourself,” the kid muttered, voice low in order to keep the handler from hearing. Peter stilled at the words - Mousy was a silent observer to his pain, nothing more. The sound of his voice was odd, not expected, and the fact that they weren’t... unkind - more vaguely threatening than anything else- shocked him even more.

His hesitation cost him. His two escorts kept moving and Peter stumbled, his already unstable legs falling out from underneath him. The other two kept moving and Peter didn’t have the strength to stand again, so he let himself be dragged.

He had an inkling of where he was being taken - *hopefully you’re broken enough now* . They were going to try to wipe him again, now that he was ‘broken’. Was he?

They arrived at their destination, and sure enough, it was the wiping room - the giant metal contraption looking just as cold and agonising as ever. Peter felt dread rise in his chest. No, no he couldn’t do this again. He didn’t know if he was strong enough to go through it for an eighth time. He didn’t know if he had enough of the good memories left to make it through to the other side. He didn’t know if he would be the same person he was now once the process was finished.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. This wasn’t supposed to happen at all. The wiping was meant to be done. Over. *No more* .

He’d prepared himself to handle torture. He was ready for that. But he didn’t know if the small

sliver of strength that he'd managed to regain by some miracle would be enough to get him through *this* .

But it would have to be, because if the Avengers *did* show up - and *God* , he hoped they did - there was no way he'd fight against them, even if it was under HYDRA's control and therefore not his own decision. What he had would need to be enough.

His handler and Mousy wrestled him down onto the table, because Peter had begun to struggle in earnest now. He drew from some well of hidden energy that he didn't know he'd had until now and used it all to fight against the restricting hands pinning him down onto the cold - *oh so cold* - table.

It was in vain, of course. His spirit may have recovered slightly, but he was as weak as he'd ever been, physically. He was strapped down in no time, still struggling, pulling against the metal. His wrists and ankles were already rubbed raw from the days (maybe, if his handler was telling the truth) of restraints they'd been subjected to, but now he ignored the pain in favour of bucking and pulling, yanking and twisting, just trying to *get out* .

He was still struggling when the electricity was turned on, and then he was jerking uncontrollably. He could feel every single one of his muscles seizing and it was *agony* , but it was worse when he felt his memories starting to slip away.

The pure helplessness was not a feeling he could describe, nor one that he had ever wished to feel again. He could feel his memories leaving their place in his head, draining from his mind, and it was *hell* . He didn't want to lose who he had become, and he didn't want to lose the memories he'd made either.

Peter had no clue what happened next. One minute he was clenching his eyes shut, trying desperately to hold onto the few good memories he had left - memories he knew for sure were genuine. Tony, grinning at him as they work in the lab, his posture easy and relaxed as he twirled a screwdriver in his fingers. Laying in his room, which he picked out the decorations for all on his own, reading a book and just *existing* . He'd never been allowed to do that before - there'd always been a purpose for him to fulfill. A mission to complete.

Then, the electricity stopped, and his handler was standing in front of him looking almost, *nervous* . He did a quick once over of his mind - there was no urge to follow orders, no blank spaces in his memory. Everything was *there* .

Everything was...there?

"Asset? What is your purpose?"

"I don't really know. Being awesome? Just generally rocking at life? You tell me," Peter responded smugly. He had no idea how he'd kept his memories; was it through pure willpower alone? Or maybe he'd grown immune to the process? Was that even possible?

"No," his handler gasped, horror painting his face. It was one of the first times that Peter had seen him display anything other than malice or indifference.

"That's right. Everything's still here, including the knowledge that you're a bit of a dick."

His handler growled and surged forward, looking like a feral animal. His hand came down on Peter's cheek, and if it weren't for the restraint around his forehead, his head would have been

turned to the side with the force of it. He was sure there was a red handprint where the slap had hit home, adding to the mess of bruises and cuts that already littered his face.

The next ten minutes were a painful blur. His handler somehow managed to move him back to his torture room, though Peter had no recollection of the trip. Maybe Mousy had helped, though he doubted it would have been necessary. His muscles were still spasming on top of his previous injuries, which meant he wasn't exactly difficult to transport.

Once Peter had been restrained in his chair again, his handler left the room. His shoulders were tensed and his face was red, air heaving in and out of his lungs, and Peter felt a tingle of satisfaction at the obvious agitation he'd instilled in his sole tormentor.

The door swung shut, locking securely behind him, and Peter allowed himself a laugh. He'd managed to escape the wiping process *and* piss off his handler. That fact alone brought him just a little joy in his rather grim situation, and with a small smirk on his face, Peter started counting the seconds yet again.

~~~

It had been a long afternoon. An extremely long, draining, painful afternoon. Still, Tony would have taken the crippling exhaustion that currently raged torrentially through his body any day, because the exhaustion meant that he'd been working. Doing things. Not sitting on his ass without a clue how to proceed, in other words.

He felt oddly...fine. No, fine wasn't the word, actually. Tony was very, *very* far from fine. But now that they had a plan, it was like he'd regained control of himself. A clinical, robotic kind of detachment had completely overtaken him, leaving his mind in a state of stoically mechanical calm. He could feel the panic probing at the edges of his brain, still threatening to overwhelm him completely, but something else was keeping it at bay. A hard resolve. Determination. And, admittedly, probably a whole lot of caffeine.

By nine o'clock, Tony had successfully located the HYDRA base (underground, as Steve had predicted, buried within the largely-deserted mountains of New Mexico). Two hours after that, the digital masks were ready. Another two hours passed, and the Iron Man suits were fully charged, along with all of Tony's weapons that they would smuggle in. By three am, Steve and Natasha were equipped with just about every scrap of information on HYDRA's security systems that Bucky had to offer.

They changed into the HYDRA uniforms and donned the masks. Tony was pleased, though not surprised, to see that his design, even having been rendered in such a short time frame, was flawless. The masks looked as realistic and convincing as the faces of their dead counterparts, and Tony was certain that the authenticity of the masks would not be questioned when they entered HYDRA. A small reassurance amongst the much larger expanse of less reassuring, questionable aspects of this mission.

*Questionable as in whether Peter's even alive at all-*

Hurriedly, Tony shook himself. He wasn't letting himself think about that. It was too world-ending

to even consider.

“Okay, time to suit up, team,” Tony announced to Steve and Natasha, once the Avengers were all gathered inside Tony’s workshop. “If you’ll just follow the gracious provider of the technology you’ll be using today...”

In order to make their mission as time efficient as possible, it had been decided that Steve and Natasha would don two of Tony’s suits on their journey to New Mexico. Given that they had already been busy memorising information about HYDRA, though, neither of them had the time nor patience to learn how to properly work the Iron Man suit, and as such, Tony had been given the delightful task of autopiloting them both.

“This is going to feel incredibly strange,” Steve murmured, eyeing the black Iron Man suit that was designated for him apprehensively. “Are you sure this is-”

“Safe? Use your brain, Rogers, why do you think I haven’t died yet?”

“You’ve never auto-piloted two other people at the same time, have you?” Steve pointed out.

Tony shrugged dismissively. “Cap, there’s this thing called FRIDAY. Dunno if you’ve heard of her? She actually kind of controls this whole Tower, stops us from being attacked and probably killed on a regular basis, and, you know, she’s sort of a genius AI that’s more than capable of making sure these suits don’t crash if I can’t control them for some reason. Trust me, this suit is as safe as you can get. A whole lot safer than your little circus get-up you’re so fond of wearing.”

Steve still looked hesitant, but Tony had neither the patience nor peace of mind to console him further. He was painfully aware that at this very moment, Peter was trapped in a dark hole somewhere in a mountain in New Mexico, undoubtedly being put through hell and back. This moment had been delayed long enough, and he wasn’t about to delay it any longer.

It was finally time to carry out what he’d been so desperate to do from the start - burn HYDRA to the fucking ground.

“FRIDAY, suit them up,” Tony commanded. “Go easy on the ancient fossil over here, apparently any technology that’s not a flip phone is kind of a daunting prospect for him.”

“*Will do, boss,*” FRIDAY replied.

Five minutes later, Natasha, Tony Steve were all sporting identical black Iron Man suits, which were the first prototypes of Tony’s new Stealth Mode models. He hadn’t perfected the invisibility factor entirely yet, but they were about as inconspicuous as a flying piece of human-sized metal could get.

“Good luck, guys,” Sam said.

“Yeah, please try not to die,” Clint added.

“Alert us as soon as the security’s down,” Bruce put in.

Steve nodded at all of this. “Stay on standby, and make your way over to the HYDRA base about an hour after we leave. Don’t get there too early, otherwise you’ll have to wait outside the base for us to let you in, and you could be noticed in that time. We’ll get back to you guys soon. Bucky, any last advice?”

Bucky hesitated, and Tony noticed he looked significantly paler than usual.

“Be quick,” he finally said. “And be careful.”

They were worried. It was written all over their faces - Bucky's most noticeably of all, but the rest of the Avengers as well. Beneath the jokes and the carefully-fabricated optimism, all of them were, quite plainly, terrified for their friends' safety.

Surprisingly, Tony's feelings didn't mirror their own. Not entirely. He was terrified, it was true, but not for his own fate. Quite frankly, he didn't care what happened to him anymore. No, the terror he was currently battling was reserved for someone else entirely.

Still, he managed to just keep the panic under control, that artificial, mechanical calmness taking over again.

“Okay,” Tony announced. “It's time to jet.”

And with that, they took off, Steve and Natasha unable to contain their gasps of surprise as all three Iron Man suits hurtled out of the Tower and into the dark night.

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It took just over three hours to reach New Mexico. The flight was painstakingly long, and practically no words were uttered during the journey, apart from three verbal repeats of the plan they'd carefully laid out. Tony had to admit, this did little to ease his apprehension; the plan was so tedious and fragile and reliant on so many things occurring at precisely the right moments that by the time they finally reached the location of the HYDRA base, the trepidation in Tony's stomach, which he had been carefully suppressing the whole trip, had reached the point where his coffee was threatening to make an ugly reappearance. Still, he swallowed past the urge, and directed all three of the Iron Man suits to the ground at a point several hundred yards away from the HYDRA base.

The three of them exited the Iron Man suits, Tony safely stowing them behind a rock and keeping his own suit upright for later access (he would no doubt be suiting up again as soon as Natasha disabled the security systems). They activated their facial masks and made sure that all their weapons were in place, successfully hidden underneath their HYDRA uniforms, which were entirely revolting in their own right. Every time Tony looked down and saw the red HYDRA insignia stitched into the chest of his uniform, he felt mildly homicidal.

“Activate the masks now,” Tony told Natasha and Steve. “Don't forget, they'll only last for an hour, so we need to-”

“Be fast,” Steve finished.

Tony nodded, his jaw set in a grim line of determination, before reaching up to his ear and pressing the small metallic button that activated the sudden change in his facial features. As his face morphed into that of the taller HYDRA agent, he was overcome with another compulsion to vomit.

Tony did not like disguises. Especially when that disguise involved impersonating someone who had assisted in Peter's capture.

They recited their plan once more for good measure, all keenly aware of the futility of the process. All three of them had long since memorised their part in the plan, and any further repetition of it was entirely unnecessary. The collective tension in the air was palpable; all three of them were on edge, although Tony was sure that whatever nerves Steve and Natasha were experiencing, it was nothing compared to the crippling terror that had a vice-like grip over his heart. In just a matter of

minutes, he was going to enter the HYDRA base.

In just a matter of minutes, he was going to find out if the kid was still alive.

He will be.

He has to be.

Tony took a deep breath and prayed to whatever kind of god existed that, for once, the fates would be kind to him.

Was that really too much to ask?

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They trudged silently up the mountainside, locating the smooth stone entryway that Bucky had identified with near certainty as the entry point into the base for all HYDRA agents. Sure enough, the retinal scanner was waiting for them, along with several telltale security cameras. In turn, they each stepped forwards and brought their eye up to the scanner, and then waited with bated breath.

After a few treacherous seconds, the rock facade slid away, revealing a dark metal corridor.

It had worked. They were in.

Tony led the way down the dark corridor, his heart pumping loudly against his chest and blood rushing in his ears. They reached a fork in the corridor, and he nodded slightly to Natasha and Steve. It was at this point that they were splitting up; Natasha and Steve were continuing into the centre of the base, where the control room was located, whilst Tony would be descending downwards. Bucky had made it very clear that all torture, brainwashing and punishments occurred in the lowest levels of the base.

Tony fought the urge to vomit again.

He continued to walk quickly down the corridor, past door after door, not entirely sure what he was looking for - a sign labelled 'Torture Room'? Or, even better, 'This Is Where We're Keeping Peter'? Bucky's knowledge could only help him so much; after all, he and Peter hadn't been kept at the same base, so it was really just going to be a matter of educated guesswork. Grimly, Tony thought that the room from which screams were emitting the loudest would be an accurate indication, although so far the only noise to reach his ears had been the sound of his own persistent footsteps-

*"You."*

Tony jumped at the sound of a slamming door; he turned and saw a HYDRA agent, masked and dressed in complete black, advancing on him.

"Where have you been?" the man growled. "You, Vortex and the Stowaway, you were due to return three days ago, you're meant to be back on ice-"

Tony didn't hesitate. He plunged his hand into the innards of his uniform and then, before the agent could so much as throw a punch, hurled a small metallic device into the man's neck. It embedded itself in the agent's skin, who swayed on the spot for several moments, before promptly collapsing to the ground, thoroughly unconscious.

*Perfect.*

Hurriedly, Tony hooked his arms under the man's armpits and dragged him into the room that he had just burst out of - a dark computer room that was, mercifully, empty. With no trace of his usual finesse, Tony roughly pulled the mask from the man's face and shoved it on over his own head, gagging slightly at the putrid air inside (HYDRA really had to improve their ventilation systems). He also took the agent's belt, which consisted of several guns and tasers, and exchanged it for his own slightly different one. Clearly, the weapons issued to the Winter Soldiers were different to that of the rest of the HYDRA agents, and Tony wasn't about to risk someone noticing the odd changes to his belt.

*Okay. So step one didn't fail. Now for everything else.*

Since he was currently alone, Tony seized the opportunity to quickly check in with his team.

"Natasha, Steve," he murmured quietly, speaking into his earpiece. "How's it going?"

"All good here," came Natasha's reply. "I took out my handler. You?"

"Haven't come across mine, from what I can tell," Tony answered. "But I stole this other guy's mask instead. Where's Steve?"

"Not sure," said Natasha, "but the fact that he isn't replying probably indicates he's fighting some HYDRA agents right now."

Tony swallowed, and hoped to God that if Steve was in a conflict, he would have the sense to use the Stark weapons Tony had graciously provided him with, instead of his own fists, as he was so very fond of doing. Now was not the time for a Captain America-style punch-up; the goal here was not to attract attention.

"Copy that," he muttered. "I'm moving in further. I'll try and let you know when I find Peter."

"I'll do the same when I hack their systems," Natasha told him.

"Copy."

Mentally pushing down his panic once more, Tony exited the room and continued in his walk down the corridor. Now that he was disguised as what he assumed was a relatively high-ranking HYDRA agent, rather than one of their brainwashed goons, he felt slightly more at ease, and was even game enough to poke his head into a few of the rooms. Most of them were empty, with nothing but a singular chair in the centre, complete with thick restraints at the feet and armrests. Tony knew only too well what that meant.

It appeared, at least, that he was in the right part of the building.

After five more minutes of this, he became aware of the sound of voices up ahead. His shoulders tensed in apprehension as he noticed a group of about five HYDRA agents, all talking in low murmurs and walking down the corridor, right towards him.

Momentarily, Tony froze; he didn't know anything about these agents, didn't know whether they were above or below him in HYDRA's hierarchy, or how he was supposed to behave around them. But by some small miracle, he was saved from having to make the first move.

"Agent Lowcroft, there you are," one of the agents said. "Sturge's been looking for you. He wants you to assign him a new assistant - apparently Reymont's gotten sick, not to mention Sturge hates him. He's been complaining about his incompetence for days now, reckons he's soft."

Okay, so maybe it was more of a curse rather than a blessing that he'd been addressed first. Tony was as close to knowing who Sturge or Reymont were as he was to the hidden secrets of the universe. Struggling to think on his feet, he decided to communicate as little as possible, so as not to give away the true cluelessness he was currently experiencing.

"Right," he said, pitching his voice to try and match the tone of the man he was impersonating. "I'll get onto that." Then, realising that he would be able to do absolutely nothing without some more details, Tony quickly concocted a question that he hoped was fairly justified. "Where's Sturge now?" he added, in what he hoped was an authoritative manner. If the address of 'agent' had been anything to go by, the man Tony was impersonating was clearly above these men in the ranks.

"Down in Room J8," said another agent. "You should know, though, sir, you've got a whole line of men eagerly waiting to be chosen."

"Yeah, seems like Asset's become a pretty popular guy," the first man added. "Everyone wants a piece of him."

"Really?" Tony muttered absent-mindedly, his confusion only increasing as he mentally added *Asset* to the list of names he knew absolutely nothing about. But then, his instincts kicked in; from the matter-of-fact, unsurprised tones of the men he'd just been talking to, this was not unexpected news. "Well, I'm not surprised," he added quickly.

"Nor am I," said a third man. "There's been...well...some rumours, sir."

"Rumours?" Tony repeated, in what he hoped was a *please elaborate* kind of tone.

"Yes," the man confirmed. "About Asset. We heard some of the others...well...people are saying..." He glanced around at his companions, as though waiting for their approval to continue, before lowering his voice and saying, "that he's - that Asset - is... *resisting*."

"Is he, now?" Tony asked, struggling to maintain his impression of the man's voice as his confusion now heightened to borderline panic. At the moment, it was his apparent authority over these men that was protecting his identity, but the longer this conversation dragged on, the more likely the chance that he would slip up. He had to exit this situation, and fast.

"Yes," the second man nodded. "We don't know how much of it is true, sir, but people are saying that it's not working. The procedure. They can't wipe him, from what we've heard."

"Is that so?" Tony said slowly. "Well, I guess I'll have to go-"

He broke off suddenly, because it had just hit him.

In a blinding flash of intuition, it all fell into place.

The men were telling him about someone. Someone that they did not refer to with a real name, but a nickname. *Asset*.

Tony had heard, just seconds ago, the agent he was impersonating refer to the other Winter Soldiers with nicknames.

And this person - Asset - was being wiped, apparently. Undergoing procedures, of sorts. Tony wasn't an expert on the ins and outs of the HYDRA brainwashing process, but he wasn't stupid either, and the phrase 'wiping him' sounded suspiciously like an act involving the removal of memories-

And Asset, whoever he was, was resisting. He was, according to these men, fighting against the brainwashing.

No. Not whoever he was. He wouldn't let himself think it, not yet, but the evidence was undeniable, and Tony was all but certain, now, who these men were referring to. His throat started to tighten, his muscles tensing tangibly, but no - he had to stay calm, he had to stay focused. Forcefully dragging himself back to the present, Tony realised that the five HYDRA agents had gone silent, staring at him in obvious confusion behind their masks.

"Is everything all right, sir?" one of them asked.

Over the course of his life, Tony had time and time again been reprimanded for his impulsive behaviour. It was a character flaw, he'd been told, by countless numbers of people; his parents, Rhodey, Pepper, Happy, even Steve. His inability to plan things out, to follow instructions, to play by the rules, would eventually be his downfall, so he'd been told. But right now, it appeared that for once in his life, Tony's impulsive tendencies were a blessing, not a curse, because no amount of planning could have prepared him for this situation.

And so, he did what Tony Stark did best - he improvised.

"Well," Tony said, once again pitching his voice in his best impression of the agent he'd taken out, "this certainly changes things. If Asset is resisting, as you say he is, well, I can't say I'm not interested. Tell that line of agents to go back to their duties - I want to see this for myself."

"Will Sturge let you?" one of the agents questioned. "Replace Reymont, that is?"

"He will," Tony said, injecting a confidence into his voice that he didn't feel, and then promptly buried all feelings of guilt and panic underneath his suddenly stony resolve as he uttered his next sentence. "I have more than enough experience in the area of...ah... *breaking down* resistance, let's just put it that way."

Even saying the words out loud, even just hearing the insinuation behind them, was nauseating. The agents, however, did not appear to share his feelings; with a trace of disgust, Tony noted that they almost looked *excited*.

"Right, of course sir," one of them said. "Well - they're keeping him in room J8. If you want to go see it for yourself."

"Yes, I think I might do just that," Tony said, and then, swallowing past his heart, which had somehow found its way into his throat, he strode past the agents and continued purposefully down the corridor.

His heart was pounding. His heart was pounding, and his mind was racing, and he could barely breathe, but still Tony forced himself not to think, or feel, not yet at least, not until he was sure, until he was *positive*. He didn't even dare to speak with Natasha or Steve through the earpiece, instead focusing all his attention on following the numbers and letters that labelled the doors, slowly working his way through the alphabet, his breath becoming tighter and tighter as he drew nearer and nearer to J8-

And then the door was there, right before him, and Tony was sure, now, that all the air had been extracted from his lungs.

Coming to a halt, he placed his hands on his knees and bent over double, taking several long, steady breaths. If there was ever a time to not have a panic attack, it was right now. The *not-*



*knowing*, the *what-if*, it was killing him, but he still had to keep his mind clear, at least for a little longer. Reminding himself that he was pretending to be a heartless, sadistic HYDRA agent, Tony took a deep breath and, gathering up every ounce of his courage, opened the door and entered room J8.

## Chapter End Notes

Alright that's that. Hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, number thirteen will be coming on Monday (it's currently Saturday for us, I don't know what your time zones are doing),so that you can all take your time reading this one or whatever.

If you liked it, leave kudos! If you really liked it, comment! It makes our day/week.

# Table For Two In The Torture House

## Chapter Notes

Hey everybody! Welcome to the next chapter. I'll keep this short and sweet because I know a lot of people are keen to read this.

Your support and enthusiasm means a lot, we hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Immediately, the stench of dried blood hit his nostrils, and a lot of it too, if the potency of the scent was anything to go by. Tony wrinkled his nose and came to a stop as he noticed a large and burly man in the centre of the room, hunched over something he couldn't see.

At the sound of his entry, the man turned to look at him. He was particularly unattractive looking, with a balding head and caterpillar-like moustache trembling on his upper lip, and in any other circumstances Tony would have snorted. As it was, the best he could do was not to vomit right there on the floor.

"Lowcroft," the man said coolly. "You got me a replacement yet?"

Tony nodded, his stomach churning. "I *am* the replacement."

At this, the man's unappealing features split into a sadistic grin. "Oh, excellent," he all but growled. "Reymont was a complete waste of space, he did nothing except stand there looking like he'd just seen someone die, or something. I'm glad you came - although I thought you were going to send someone lower, I'll admit, don't you have better things to be doing?"

"No, actually," Tony quickly invented, falling back on his earlier lie. "I heard something about Asset resisting? Sparked my curiosity, so I came to see whether it was true or not."

At this, the man's face darkened considerably, turning sour and unpleasant.

"Oh, it's true all right," he growled. "Unfortunately. I tried to wipe the little shit eight times - *eight*, for crying out loud. It did nothing. I tell you what, Lowcroft, I'm not liking this new version of him - he's kind of a brat, fair warning, been doing nothing but piss me off this whole time."

But Tony's patience had run out; his chest was tightening with every word Sturge spoke, because the pile of evidence had now exceeded any sort of doubt that had been left in his mind, and he was surer than he'd ever been in his life.

"Where is he?" Tony broke in, not caring how harsh his voice sounded.

Sturge blinked, looking confused, and then grinned again. "Oh, of course. You want to see the damage, I'm guessing?" At Tony's terse nod, Sturge's grin widened. "Well, get ready for a wonderful sight, because he's right here."

And then, just before Tony lost control and punched the guy, Sturge stepped aside, revealing what his broad frame had previously been concealing.

Tony's heart immediately plummeted from his throat to the floor.

There, sitting in the chair that was placed in the centre of the room, was Peter.

Horried, paralysed, Tony took in the sight of his kid. Blood coated every inch of his bare torso, which was riddled with a seemingly endless number of crude cuts and gashes. These deep cuts continued onto his arms, which was similarly coated in a thick layer of blood, and even more of the terrible red liquid seeped down onto his track pants (Tony would have assumed that their original colour was a rusty brown, if he hadn't known better), still leaking from the injuries. Peter's usually-brown hair was stained a dark, wine-red, matted against his forehead with sweat and blood, and his face was barely recognisable amidst the large, swollen colourful bruises that decorated every inch of his features.

Tony's first impulse was to scream with rage. This was followed closely by a desire to rush at Sturge, the man who had quite obviously inflicted every single one of these horrific injuries on Peter, and who was now watching the kid with an expression of sickly pride, as though he was admiring a particularly difficult piece of art that he'd spent a long time creating. A flood of white-hot rage surged through Tony, and it took every last inch of self-control he'd ever had not to charge at this pathetic excuse for a human being, to slam him into a wall and start raining down punch after punch until his face was even more bloodied and bruised than Peter's...

"When the little worm started resisting the wiping," Sturge explained, "I had to get creative. Figured if he wasn't going to cooperate on the soldier side of things, might as well get some other information out of him, you know? I've been asking him about the Avengers, what they're planning, things like that, but he refuses to tell me anything. I think I'm getting close to breaking him, though...there's only so much drowning a guy can take, if you get my drift..."

At this, he smiled sadistically again, and Tony's blood curdled. Surely Sturge did not mean what Tony thought he meant...

"Oh yeah, that's what I'm planning on starting off with," Sturge quickly went on. "A few rounds of waterboarding. Already did it to him, once, and he didn't seem to enjoy it very much, not at all. Isn't that right, Asset?" he added, addressing Peter directly now.

Tony's rage doubled as his worst fears were confirmed - Jesus Christ, Sturge had been *waterboarding* the kid as well, and Tony knew all too well how incredibly terrifying that felt - but he was quickly distracted by the resounding sound of a slap through the room. Tony refocused his attention on Sturge to see that the bastard was now shaking and slapping Peter viciously, obviously in an attempt to wake him up.

*Get off him, you sick son of a bitch, Tony chanted, get off him, get your fucking hands off him, don't touch him-*

Finally, Peter's eyelids fluttered open, and he groaned as he raised his head to meet Sturge's eyes. Based on the exhaustion and weakness that so clearly accompanied every one of his movements, Tony expected the kid to pass back out again in a number of seconds. He most definitely did not expect Peter's next words.

"Oh, goody, it's you again. If I didn't know better, I'd say you've gotten rather fond of me," Peter said, his voice surprisingly casual.

"Yes, it's me, Asset," Sturge said. "I've brought you a guest." Grinning once more, he jerked a thumb towards Tony, whose heart had promptly returned to his throat.

The kid's eyes were on him, now, but they weren't the eyes he was used to. There was no playful spark in Peter's gaze, no sign of humour, or excitement, or that adorable affection he had become

so attached to. No, Peter's eyes were now painfully similar to the way they had looked when Tony had first come across the kid, that fateful day in Queens - hollow. Empty. Haunted.

Tony wanted, desperately, to communicate with Peter, to somehow let him know that it was *Tony*, and not some sadistic psychopath, that Sturge had unwittingly brought into his torture chamber. But the mask still concealed his face, not to mention the Winter Soldier disguise he'd formulated himself that was still underneath, and there was absolutely no way he could signal anything else to Peter without Sturge noticing.

"A guest?" Peter repeated, looking mildly surprised. "I have to admit, that's kind of disappointing. I liked Mousy."

"Mousy?" Sturge repeated, looking contemptuous.

"Yeah. You know, your other helper. Before Darth Vader over here came to take his place," Peter added, jerking a head in his direction, and despite himself, Tony was incredulous. Of all the untimely occasions in the world, the kid chose *now* to make a *Star Wars* reference?

"How nice of you, Asset," Sturge mocked. "You gave him a nickname."

"Yeah, well, that's the common theme around here, isn't it?" Peter went on, and Tony was still in disbelief that, despite the kid's terrible physical appearance, he somehow didn't appear to be subdued in the slightest. He was cracking jokes, making pop culture references, and overall being a total smartass to Sturge, something Tony would have been immensely proud of if he wasn't so angry and terrified all at once. The only indication that something wasn't quite right with the kid was the hollow, haunted look in his eyes.

"You people seem to have this weird obsession with giving out literally the most boring, uninventive nicknames possible," Peter continued. "I mean, come on. *Asset*? Really? Sure, I was the Spider on missions, but that's not much better. Was that really the best you guys could do? That was the extent of your creativity? I mean, I get it, you're an evil organisation that's too busy hailing HYDRA to have time for coming up with fun names, but you could have at least made me sound *cool*. You know what I recommend? Take some notes from the Avengers. Now, *their* nicknames are actually acceptable - the Black Widow. Fantastic. The Falcon. Epic. Captain America. Inspiring. Iron Man. Awesome."

Sturge rolled his eyes, before turning to Tony. "That's the other thing I forgot to mention," he growled. "He's obsessed with the Avengers now. Been going on about them nonstop since he got here. Seems to think they're going to come *rescue* him, or something. Well, look around you, Asset," Sturge said, turning back to Peter and practically yelling into his face, "do you see any of your precious Avengers around? Where's the Black Widow, huh? Where's Captain America? Where's Iron Man?"

The terrible irony in these statements was so painful, so torturous, that Tony had to clench his fists so tight he drew blood in his palms. He wanted nothing more than to murder this man in cold blood, to see the look on his face as he proved to him just where, exactly, Iron Man was-

"That's right," Sturge said, a nasty grin spreading across his face. "They're not here, that's for sure. They're not coming, Asset. None of your little Avengers are here to save the day. And unless you wanna tell us anything about them, you're about to go for another little swim."

Tony actually wanted Peter to give in. As complicated as he knew things would get if HYDRA found out information about the Avengers, it was nothing compared to the terror he felt at Peter being waterboarded. He stared at Peter, trying to silently convey a message through the mask, but

the kid wasn't looking at him, instead focused on Sturge.

"I guess I'll go with option B, then," Peter decided indifferently. "Like I said, I do love myself a good swim. And something definitely has to be done about this red hair dye you've given me, I'm really not a fan of the clown look," he added, gesturing to his blood-soaked hair.

*No, kid, what are you doing?* Tony felt like screaming.

The need to scream increased a hundredfold when Sturge left the room, only to return moments later with a large tub full of water.

"Let's get started, then," Sturge said, rubbing his hands together twistedly. "Lowcroft, would you mind untying him for me? I might need some help getting him over to the tub, Asset doesn't like to cooperate."

Swallowing past the dangerous combination of fear and anger that had him all but paralysed, Tony forced his limbs into action. He made his way over to Peter, each step feeling stiff and disjointed and *wrong*, because of course if he'd had his way he would be running to Peter's side and whisking the kid away from this monster's grasps, not offering him up as bait to the monster instead. Still, there was nothing to be done - his earpiece remained painfully silent, a sharp reminder that Natasha and Steve had not, yet, succeeded in their parts of the plan.

Tony could only hope they would. And soon.

Trying to maintain a delicate balance between keeping up his act of vicious sadism whilst not hurting Peter, Tony quickly removed the restraints around Peter's wrists and ankles and helped Sturge drag him, none too gently, over to the tub of water. Another curl of nausea gripped Tony's insides as he noticed the countless lash marks that had ravaged the skin on Peter's back, evidence of an extensive amount of whipping. Not for the first time, he cursed HYDRA to hell and back.

"Do you want the honours, agent?" Sturge asked him casually. "Treat yourself to a bit of fun, how about it?"

*Keep talking, buddy, and I might do just that,* Tony thought dangerously. The only course of action that sounded even remotely 'fun' to him currently would be punching this guy's face until it looked like mashed potato.

"No," he said, trying to sound as though this was a difficult decision, rather than something that nauseated him to his very core. "No, I'd rather watch. It's more entertaining to, ah, see it from a distance."

Out of all the lies he'd had to tell tonight, this one was by far the worst.

Because it was not entertaining. Not in the slightest. In fact, it was the complete opposite. It was torture, and Tony wasn't even the one experiencing the waterboarding.

Roughly, with no gentleness whatsoever, Sturge grabbed Peter's head and shoved it under the water, holding it there with both his hands. At first, Peter remained still and unmoving, apparently calm despite the fact that he was being held underwater against his will. After a minute, though, his instincts began to kick in, and Peter started to thrash and writhe violently, clearly fighting his torturer with every bit of strength he had. Had Peter been healthy, properly fed, and free from injuries, Tony had no doubt whatsoever that the kid would have easily been able to overpower this Sturge guy. The issue was, Peter was not healthy in the slightest, bleeding and bruised and broken and God knew what else, and Tony doubted he'd been fed a proper meal in the entire time he'd

been kept at this godforsaken base. And so there was nothing he could do by watch, as second after agonising second ticked by, and *still* the complete sociopath that had hold of Peter didn't release his head, keeping it held firmly under the water, and Tony was about three milliseconds away from intervening and slamming the guy through a wall right then and there-

And then finally, after what felt like centuries, Sturge released Peter's head. The kid broke the surface of the water, gasping and convulsing and retching violently, his chest heaving as though he had just run several marathons in quick succession.

*Please, let it be over,* Tony thought. *It's done, that's enough, you better get your hands off him now-*

But the bastard appeared to just be getting started.

It happened again. And again. And again. Over and over, until Tony had lost track of time, had lost all sense of where he was, had even forgotten the goal of the mission he'd come here to complete. All he could see was Peter, being viciously dunked into the tub over and over again and held there for a terrifyingly long amount of time, and the haunting parallels to Tony's own experience with waterboarding, in Afghanistan all those years ago. Because he knew exactly how it felt to be forcibly held under the water, lungs screaming in protest, the pain attacking his insides like fire, every fibre in his body screaming for a release, for a respite, but not knowing when, or if ever, that release would come. He knew exactly how it felt to be brought up for a second, a tiny moment of relief as glorious air rushed into his lungs, only to be slammed into the water again before the little oxygen he'd inhaled had even properly travelled to his lungs. He knew exactly how it felt to have this process repeated again, and again, and again, so many times that the desperate fire in his lungs completely took over him, and life and death blended together into one terrible, endless chasm of pure agony-

Finally, the nightmare ended.

"Hope you enjoyed the show," Sturge grinned at him, and Tony realised with a jolt of world-ending relief that the sick psycho had finally given up on the waterboarding. The return to reality jarred him heavily, because if he was being honest, the previous minutes had blurred into nothing but the terrible sounds of Peter's struggles as he was held in the water, interspersed with flashback after flashback from Afghanistan. Once again, the urge to run to Peter right then and there, rip him from this monstrous being's grasp whilst punching said monstrous being into oblivion, and then fly him out of this hellhole, was all-consuming. It almost swallowed him whole.

And now the sadist had the audacity to ask him if he had *enjoyed* it? Oh, what Tony wouldn't give to rip this man apart, limb by satisfying limb-

*Not yet. Keep it together. You've gotta stay patient.*

"Yeah," Tony forced out, and even though he was perfectly aware of the falsity of his statement, it still sent a fresh wave of self-directed nausea curdling through him. He suddenly felt unclean, wrong, *dirty*, as though he had just committed an incredibly serious crime, and it took every last scrap of willpower to keep up the painful act. "Yes, it was very enjoyable."

"I'm glad I could entertain you," Sturge grinned, turning back to Peter, who was slumped half-unconscious in the man's anything-but-gentle grip. "Can you come help me put him back in the chair? I don't think we're quite done with him yet."

*The hell you aren't,* Tony struggled not to growl out loud. Another surge of dangerous fury crashed through him, and as he helped Sturge drag Peter back to the chair and refasten the restraints, it was

all he could do not to let the anger, which had been steadily building up inside him, loose entirely.

*Not yet. Wait for the signal. Not yet.*

“You mind waiting here for a minute?” the sick bastard proceeded to ask him. “Our next little show requires a prop or two, I’m afraid. I’ll be back soon.”

“No problem,” Tony forced out.

Sturge shot him another sickening grin, before turning and exiting the room, slamming the metal door shut behind him. As soon as they were alone, Tony didn’t hesitate. He strode over to Peter’s side, crouching in front of him, and pulled off his mask. Instantly, he could tell that the Winter Soldier disguise had faded as well - the chip behind his ear wasn’t humming anymore, signalling that it had deactivated.

He was Tony Stark again. Finally, he could show his face to Peter.

The problem was, the kid was all but unresponsive. Slumped halfway down in his chair, his head lolling to the side against the wood with his eyes closed, he looked close to passing out entirely.

“Kid,” Tony said softly. “Peter.”

Nothing whatsoever from Peter. A coil of anxiety tightening around his stomach, Tony tried again.

“Peter,” he said, louder this time. “Kid. Peter. It’s me, it’s Tony. Kid?”

To Tony’s immense relief, Peter’s eyelids fluttered, albeit extremely weakly, and he wearily dragged his head off the chair to regard Tony. Tony waited with bated breath, expecting some sort of relieved reaction from Peter, or at the very least not outright hatred. What he did not expect, however, was the harsh bark of mirthless laughter that suddenly left Peter’s lips.

“Ha, ha, ha,” Peter drawled, his speech slurred slightly. “That’s...that’s a good one. What is it now, drugs? I feel like it’s drugs. Brainwashing doesn’t work, physical torture doesn’t work, so you’ve moved onto turning me into a hallucinating nutcase, is that it?”

“You’re not hallucinating, Peter,” Tony said, loudly and clearly. To demonstrate his point, he raised a hand to place a grounding touch on Peter’s shoulders, but the kid flinched violently away at his sudden movement. Catching himself, Tony tried again. “It’s me. It’s Tony. This...this isn’t a dream.”

Peter squinted at him, deep suspicion etched into his eyes. “Hmmm. I have to hand it to you guys, you really know how to work the CGI. This almost looks real.”

“That’s because it is,” Tony tried again, now close to a fully-fledged panic attack. If he couldn’t even get Peter to recognise him, if he couldn’t gain the kid’s trust...there was absolutely no way Peter would come with him willingly back to the Tower. And Tony had absolutely no desire to lay another hand on Peter again, not after what he’d just been forced to witness, and very nearly participate in.

“Or maybe...maybe this isn’t a hallucination,” Peter went on, looking mildly curious. “I guess I could be in the afterlife, or something? Yeah, that’d make more sense, although if this is the afterlife I don’t think it’s heaven. Heaven’s not supposed to hurt, is it? No, I’m fairly sure it’s not. Looks like I’ve ended up in hell, then.” He let out another humourless laugh. “Not that I’m surprised, I’ve gotta say. There was probably a cell reserved in hell with my name on it ever since my first kill.” Peter paused, considering Tony more closely, and then continued, “Although, if this

is hell, I have no idea why you're here. Last I heard, you were still alive. And even if you did die, there's no way you'd end up in hell."

*That's very debatable*, Tony thought but did not say. For the first time in his life, he had absolutely nothing *to* say. He was at a loss, wanting Peter to see sense so desperately but unable to work out how to make that happen.

"So it's back to square one, then," Peter decided. "I'm hallucinating. You people have drugged me up, made me all high and loopy. If you don't mind me asking, what exactly have you got pumping into me right now? Whatever it is, it's really freaking strong, this feels insanely real right now--"

And then, with a sudden flash, Tony knew what he had to say.

"Your name is Peter," he interrupted, talking loudly over the kid's ramblings. Peter quietened immediately, watching Tony with guarded eyes. "You used to work for HYDRA, but you don't anymore. You escaped. You got out. You were on a mission, but a boy and his father got in the way of your target and you were about to kill them. Before you could, the boy got hurt and his father sang a lullaby to him. That lullaby was Twinkle Twinkle, and it made you remember something. Your own mother, singing that own song to you. It made you realise that you didn't want to be with HYDRA anymore. It gave you the strength to leave."

Tony fell silent, his heart pounding furiously as he waited anxiously to see whether it had been enough, whether it had worked. For several long moments, Peter didn't say anything, staring at Tony with two haunted eyes as if he'd seen a ghost. But then, after what felt like an eternity, his expression morphed from distrust into a stunned kind of disbelief, as though he wanted to believe something but hardly dared to.

"Tony?" Peter whispered. "It's really you?"

"It's really me, kid," Tony said, the tension in his muscles flooding away to nothing at Peter's words.

Peter stared at him for several more seconds, apparently struggling to comprehend something. "But - the other guy - Darth Vader - where'd you come from?"

"Kid, I *was* Darth Vader," Tony explained in what he hoped was a light-hearted tone, although the very phrase made him feel hollow inside. "Surely you don't think so little of me that you honestly believe I wouldn't make a killer, stealthy, James Bond-style, psychopath-fooling entrance?"

"It was *you* ," Peter breathed, understanding flooding his features. "Oh my God, oh my fucking God, it's you, Tony. You're here, you're really here, this can't be real, how is this even possible--"

"Kid, we can go over the details later," Tony interrupted, keenly aware that he had limited time before Sturge came back in. "Listen, Peter, I have to tell you something. Natasha and Steve are here too, and they're working on shutting down HYDRA's security so that the rest of the team can come in, but until then..." He paused, unsure if he would be able to get the terrible words out of his mouth, which were, essentially, a sentence to torture. "Until then," he went on, voice shaking slightly, "I'm not supposed to do anything, I can't get rid of this jackass. You're going to have to hold on, all right? I'm so, so, sorry Pete, but you're gonna have to go through this just a little longer--"

His words were abruptly cut off by the sound of a door slamming open. Jumping to his feet, his heart leaping into his throat, Tony quickly threw his HYDRA mask back on and stepped away from the kid, to a distance that suggested he'd been doing nothing except happily inspecting the



damage Sturge had inflicted on Peter.

“Well, I’m back,” the bastard himself announced, as he closed the door behind him. “And I’ve brought a new gift to try.”

Bile rose in Tony’s thought as Sturge approached him and the so-called gift was revealed; a long, old-fashioned style fire poker, the tip of which was glowing a burning red. There was no doubt in his mind what *this* particular weapon was going to be used for, and it caused the urge to vomit, which he’d been battling for so long, to return full force.

“You sure you don’t want a turn, Lowcroft?” Sturge offered casually. “I always find that participating, rather than just spectating, leaves me feeling particularly satisfied.”

“Trust me, watching everything unfold is satisfying enough,” Tony ground out, struggling to maintain the excuse he’d devised, which was rapidly deteriorating in convincingness as his patience slowly ran out. Luckily for him, though, he was dealing with a sick, twisted psychopath, and such men were not often inclined to indulge in an unnecessary action of selflessness.

“Well, can’t say I’m disappointed,” Sturge shrugged. “All the more fun for me, I guess.” Then, turning back to Peter, he raised the scalding-hot poker high, so that it was clearly visible to the kid.

“See this, Asset?” Sturge whispered in a voice coated with sickening glee. “It’s called a fire poker, and I’ve just spent five minutes cooking it up nicely in some heated coals, making it about as hot as an actual fire itself.”

“Really? I’d worked that much out for myself, funnily enough,” Peter replied easily, and Tony saw that the haunted look in his eyes had dissipated entirely, replaced by a savage kind of determination. “It’s called common sense, dickhead. When you stick something in a fire, it becomes - and now this is a real shock - hot. Not that I’d expect you to understand, the education down here *is* pretty poorly funded...guess that’s just a nasty side effect of spending all your big bucks on freezers to turn people into Icy Poles.”

Sturge drew back his hand and slapped Peter hard across the face, causing Tony’s blood to boil.

*Don’t touch him. You better leave him the fuck alone-*

“Tell me about the Avengers,” Sturge said in a low voice, all traces of humour gone from his tone, “or so help me, you little shit, I’ll deep fry every inch of your skin with this poker.”

“Oh, joy, another game! This should be fun,” Peter grinned, the determination still burning in his eyes. “I’ve always wanted to be turned into a French fry.”

“You’ll be turned into much worse than that,” Sturge hissed. “Want a demonstration?”

And then, before Peter had time to respond, the psycho leaned over and pressed the poker hard into the bare skin on Peter’s chest. Immediately, Peter flinched and slammed his head back against the chair, screwing up his face in obvious agony, yet no sound escaped him.

“Ouch,” Sturge said mockingly, as he withdrew the poker to reveal an ugly, blistering, red-raw mark on Peter’s skin. “That does look painful. How would you like the rest of your body to look like that, Asset?”

Once again, Tony hoped desperately that Peter would just give in, that the kid would give the bastard some piece of information, anything to placate him and prevent the terrible torture that was sure to happen otherwise. But if anything, Peter’s determination had only increased since the

waterboarding, the promise of rescue and the sight of Tony clearly fuelling him to remain just as stubborn and smart-mouthed as ever.

“Well, red *is* my best colour,” Peter drawled casually.

“I guess we’ll have to test that, then,” Sturge snarled, before proceeding to slam the red-hot poker into Peter’s shoulder.

It was torture all over again. Sturge, being the unfeeling sadist that he was, seemed to take enormous pleasure from holding the poker on Peter’s skin for unnecessarily extended amounts of time, over and over again, and Peter’s blood-stained torso was soon littered with burnt and blistering marks, some so severe that they were singed black. The nauseating smell of burning flesh filled the air as Sturge pressed the poker again, and again, and again, but through it all, Peter didn’t let a single scream escape him. The effort was quite clearly using up every last inch of willpower the kid had ever possessed; sweat rolled down his face in steady streams, every muscle in his body tensed, his face screwed up tightly in agony as he thrashed against his restraints every time the poker made contact with his skin. At one point, the kid bit his lip so hard that it started to bleed, in an obvious attempt to stifle another scream, and Tony had a dark realisation, then, of why Peter seemed so determined not to make a sound.

It was because of him. Because Tony, like an absolute idiot, had revealed himself to Peter before Natasha had given him the signal, thus alerting Peter to the fact that Tony had to sit and watch Peter being tortured right before his eyes. Clearly, this silent battle of wills was Peter’s valiant attempt at saving him pain, a last-ditch effort to spare Tony some of the anguish he felt at having to watch this.

Little did the kid know, it only served to make Tony feel infinitely more guilty.

*Curse that kid’s goddamned selflessness.*

More than once, Tony tried to catch the kid’s eye, to let him know, through some non-verbal means of communication, that it would be over soon, that it was okay, that he didn’t have to sit there stifling his screams like a self-sacrificing martyr just for Tony’s sake, but once again the mask prevented anything of this sort. Tony was completely helpless; unable could do nothing but watch as Sturge attacked Peter with the poker in an endless cycle, the urge to do something, *anything*, almost suffocating him, tearing him up from the inside out, a terrible parasite-

And then, just as Tony was considering murdering Sturge on the spot, all plans be damned, several things happened at once.

His earpiece, which had remained painfully silent for the entirety of the torture, burst into sound.

“Tony, it’s done, it’s done!” someone yelled. Steve. “Hurry, we’ve got about five seconds before everything goes to hell - the team’s coming, *get Peter out now*- ”

Just as Tony registered this, he also became aware of Sturge, who had momentarily paused his brutal poker attack on Peter to taunt the kid once more.

“See, Asset? Didn’t I tell you?” he tormented. “No one’s coming. Your Avenger friends, the ones you were so sure were going to come rescue you - look around, Asset! I don’t see them! Where’s Captain America, your so-called *inspiration*? Where’s Thor, the self-proclaimed god? Where’s the Black Widow? Where’s Iron Man?”

Anger such as he had never known pumped through his veins, the result of three days’ worth of

forced suppression and control, of repeatedly telling himself to wait, to hold on a little longer, to stay focused and patient. The fury rose to breaking point, combining with adrenaline to create one terrible, monstrous ball of destruction, and finally, Tony gave in to the urge he'd been struggling so hard to contain, the urge which he could finally let loose, because they'd done it, Natasha and Steve had finally done it, and Tony was free to punch every last HYDRA agent into oblivion. He walked up behind Sturge and ripped off the revolting HYDRA mask.

"Right fucking here, you asshole."

Sturge turned just in time to register Tony Stark's livid expression before the punches started raining down.

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Peter's wake up was not pleasant.

He didn't even remember falling asleep, but he must have done so sometime after the wiping process failed yet again. Maybe it had been the rhythmic counting in his head that had done it, or maybe it was the deep exhaustion that he felt in every bone and every muscle in his body.

He wasn't asleep now, though. His - frankly, very rude - handler, had decided that the best way to bring him back to the land of the living was to slap him upon the head. Repeatedly.

Nevertheless, Peter took the disarming wake up in his stride. What else could he do?

"Oh, goody, it's you again. If I didn't know better, I'd say you've gotten rather fond of me," Peter said, surprising even himself with how casual his voice sounded. He'd expected it to be rough, trembling, but practice makes perfect and all that.

"Yes, it's me, Asset," his handler said. "I've brought you a guest." Grinning once more, he jerked a thumb towards a short figure standing in the corner. Peter felt a small flicker of disappointment in his chest when he saw that it wasn't Mousy. That kid had grown on him, loathe as Peter was to admit it, and Mousy had never been particularly violent, which was always a plus when one was being held against their will by an evil organisation.

The replacement - Peter had assumed he was a male, based on their body shape - was dressed in the regular HYDRA uniform given to all agents, and his face was covered by the mask that handlers wore to signify their status. The masks themselves resembled Darth Vader's mask, a fact that Peter had been thoroughly amused to discover when he'd watched Star Wars for the first time. The figure - which Peter promptly named Vader (he was a fan, okay, sue him) - seemed to jerk when they made eye contact. Maybe Peter should've called him Twitchy instead.

"A guest?" Peter said slowly, feeling a little dumb as he did so. To be fair, he'd endured god-knows how many hours of torture, so his brain was a little less effective than usual. "I have to admit, that's kind of disappointing. I liked Mousy." Peter didn't bother asking where Mousy had gone, or if he was alright. It wasn't like his handler would've given him an answer anyway.

"Mousy?" his handler repeated, looking contemptuous, but also slightly confused, as if Peter's comment had knocked him off-kilter slightly.

"Yeah. You know, your other helper. Before Darth Vader over here came to take his place," Peter

added, jerking his head in Vader's direction. He couldn't see the man's face, or much of his body at all, but the man made another jerky, aborted movement, and Peter wondered if he had some kind of obscure medical condition.

"How nice of you, Asset," his handler mocked. "You gave him a nickname."

"Yeah, well, that's the common theme around here, isn't it?" Peter went on, struggling not to sigh. Though banter was fun, and insulting his handler was even more so, it did become repetitive after a while. He really just wanted to go home and see the Avengers. Peter ignored the voice in the back of his mind that told him they weren't coming. He didn't have the time nor the energy to be depressed - he could do it later, when he was safe and his spider-sense stopped its constant tingling at the nape of his neck. It was getting annoying, and his already frayed nerves were struggling to keep up with the constant stream of *danger danger danger* that the weird sixth sense was sending his way. "You people seem to have this weird obsession with giving out literally the most boring, uninventive nicknames possible. I mean, come on. *Asset*? Really? Sure, I was the Spider on missions, but that's not much better. Was that really the best you guys could do? That was the extent of your creativity? I mean, I get it, you're an evil organisation that's too busy hailing HYDRA to have time for coming up with fun names, but you could have at least made me sound *cool*. You know what I recommend? Take some notes from the Avengers. Now, *their* nicknames are actually acceptable - the Black Widow. Fantastic. The Falcon. Epic. Captain America. Inspiring. Iron Man. Awesome," Peter said and he struggled not to flinch as he said each of their names, ignoring the memories they brought to the surface. He wasn't back at the Tower, baking cookies with Sam or tinkering with Tony. Now was not a good time to get all teary and mopey, especially when his handler had a new assistant that Peter direly needed to suss out.

His handler rolled his eyes, before turning to Vader. "That's the other thing I forgot to mention," he growled. "He's obsessed with the Avengers now. Been going on about them nonstop since he got here. Seems to think they're going to come *rescue* him, or something. Well, look around you, Asset," his handler said, turning back to Peter and practically yelling into his face. Peter gritted his teeth and forced himself not to flinch away as spittle flew into his face. *Don't break. Don't break.* "Do you see any of your precious Avengers around? Where's the Black Widow, huh? Where's Captain America? Where's Iron Man?" Peter noticed movement in the corner of his eye, and glanced behind his handler to see Vader clenching his fists tightly. Seriously, was the guy okay? Did he need medical attention? A doctor? Peter was sure there had to be a couple of medical personnel floating around the base somewhere.

"That's right," his handler said, a nasty grin spreading across his face. "They're not here, that's for sure. They're not coming, Asset. None of your little Avengers are here to save the day. And unless you wanna tell us anything about them, you're about to go for another little swim."

As hard as he tried not to, Peter gulped. He knew what that analogy meant - waterboarding - and he didn't like the sound of another round one bit. He didn't know if he could go through it again. Not after what he'd already endured; he couldn't take it. He couldn't bear the feeling of air leaving his lungs, of seeing it go in the form of little silver bubbles as it floated away from him and towards the surface. Steeling himself, he took a deep breath.

"I guess I'll go with option B, then," Peter said, trying his best to sound indifferent, and not like there was terror clouding his mind and running undiluted through his veins. "Like I said, I do love myself a good swim. And something definitely has to be done about this red hair dye you've given me, I'm really not a fan of the clown look," he added, gesturing to his blood-soaked hair, which he'd acquired sometime after the last waterboarding episode, though he couldn't exactly remember how. He vaguely recognised the fact that not remembering how he got a head injury was a bad thing, but he didn't have time to dwell on it as his handler re-entered the room - *when had he left?* -

with a familiar tub of water. *Joy* .

“Let’s get started, then,” his handler said, rubbing his hands together twistedly. It occurred to Peter, then, just how sick this man really was. He'd known it before, sure, but he'd never really comprehended how very deep that sickness ran - until now. The man was sociopathic to the ninth degree; a sadist in the extreme.

“Lowcroft, would you mind untying him for me? I might need some help getting him over to the tub, Asset doesn’t like to cooperate.”

Peter couldn’t help but feel smug at that. He’d managed to make himself a reputation here, in this cursed place, and that apparent reputation said that he was difficult to manage, and even harder to crack. What his handler had said was only confirmed by the whispers of the HYDRA agents he’d heard through the walls and above him through the ceiling - “apparently he’s giving his handler a whole world of trouble,” the gruff voice from the left corner of his ceiling had said, about an hour after his last waterboarding session, and it had bolstered his will when it felt like he was about to crumble. “They can’t wipe him, from what we’ve heard. He’s resisting,” according to the group of agents walking past the door, and that knowledge had given him yet another drop of much needed strength.

He was a fighter, according to HYDRA. He was resisting, he was causing trouble. The very organisation that was working to break him down, was unintentionally building him back up, and the irony of the situation was not lost on Peter.

Vader - or, he supposed, Lowcroft, though Peter didn’t like that name as much as Vader. It lacked a certain... *je ne sais quois*, and so he decided to ignore the name Lowcroft in favour of the cooler one - startled when Peter’s handler called his name. He jerked into action, stumbling disjointedly over to where Peter was sat in his chair. HYDRA hadn’t exactly managed to gather the cream of the crop lately, if Mousy, a nervous boy that was far too sympathetic for his own good, and Vader, a man who walked like a drunk alcoholic and twitched every time someone so much as looked at him, were anything to go by. Maybe recruitment rates for organisations planning to control (or end, whatever came first) the world were down.

Together, his handler and Vader wrestled him over to the tub, and Peter fought with all he had. The fact that neither of the two men seemed to notice his struggles was both disheartening and one Peter tried to ignore. He couldn’t let his self esteem get any lower than it already had. Confidence in one’s abilities was important when one was plotting to escape from a high-security building. Sure, he was still in the ‘ideas’ phase of his plotting, but confidence was important nonetheless.

What he couldn't help but notice, however, was the fact that Vader was staring at his back, which was undoubtedly covered in lashes from the whip. The man’s hands, which so far had been surprisingly gentle, tightened and seemed to shake minutely. Peter was now one hundred percent sure that the man had a medical condition of some kind. Maybe he’d missed a dose of medication?

“Do you want the honours, agent?” his handler asked Vader casually, and the man twitched yet again - he seriously needed to get that under control. “Treat yourself to a bit of fun, how about it?”

Yep , Peter thought, *that man is definitely a sadist* .

“No,” Vader said, and Peter was startled by the strangled quality of the man’s voice, but his handler didn’t seem to notice anything off. “No, I’d rather watch. It’s more entertaining to, ah, see it from a distance.”

Huh, maybe this guy is a sadist too. Lucky me.

Before Peter could ruminate further on just how many people in this godforsaken organisation were sadists, his handler grabbed his head roughly, fisting his fingers in Peter's blood-soaked hair.

Peter only had a moment of warning, when his spider-sense flashed painfully at the base of his neck, a stark contrast to the constant humming it had been keeping up, before his handler shoved his head under the water and Peter suddenly lost the ability to breathe. *Why couldn't the ability to breathe underwater be one of my powers?*

At first, he remained still and unmoving, knowing that he needed to conserve oxygen, knowing that he *could not panic* .

It was easier said than done, though, and after a few minutes of the water creeping up his nose, of the burning in his lungs and the cotton-wool feeling in his mind, his instincts began to kick in.

Peter started to thrash and writhe, kicking out and jerking, fighting the closed hands tangled in his hair with everything he had. He knew, he just *knew* , that if he'd been healthy, properly fed, and uninjured, he'd be free. His handler would have been thrown halfway across the room by now, far, far away from him, and Peter would have been out of this room faster than you could say 'hail HYDRA'.

However, Peter was decidedly *not* healthy. He was in pain - *agony* , even - the bone-deep ache of his injuries racing up and down the length of his body, unstoppable and disarming in the way it made itself known through his slow movements and even slower brain.

His lungs thirsted for air, and the silver bubbles weren't floating to the surface anymore. It was a shame, really, they'd been so pretty. The way they caught the fractals of light shining through the surface and moved with an ever-changing elegance had been mesmerising. But they had left, taking his last breath of air with them, and now he felt blackness creep into his vision, fog clouding his mind as his movements slowed. He could hear nothing but his own racing heartbeat, but still his handler refused to let him up.

And then finally, after what felt like centuries, the resistance keeping him from raising his head was gone, and he broke the surface.

Fresh, clean air surrounded him, and he gasped it in, pausing only to cough up what felt like bucketfuls of water, feeling his chest lighten as he did so. Peter never wanted to see water ever again after today; drinking may be a problem, but it was one he'd overcome. Maybe Bruce could attach him to a permanent IV? Whatever happened, he could deal, as long as that was over. As long as that was all he'd have to go through.

Please, let it be over, Peter thought. *It's done, that's enough, you better get your hands away from me now or so help me god I'll-*

He'd what? He was weak, injured, starving and incapable of even shaking off a regular, non-enhanced man. The Avengers, in all likelihood, weren't coming, which meant that he'd either have to somehow - miraculously - escape on his own, or die here. He didn't really like the sound of either option, the former because it seemed impossible, and the latter because it was just sad.

He'd manage though, as long as the waterboarding was over. It was probably his least favourite torture method so far - God, he'd reached the stage where he had a *preference* on how he was *tortured* , how ironic, considering he'd rankled his handler about it in the very beginning, before all of this had really began. He could deal with physical pain, knew the coping mechanisms and relatively unhealthy dissociation methods, but waterboarding was another thing entirely. It deprived him of his life source; the one thing he needed constantly to stay alive, and he wasn't able

to get it. It just had to be over. It had to be done. *No more, please* .

But his handler appeared to have other ideas. The man had never listened to his pleas in the past, why would he start now?

It happened again. And again. And again. Over and over, until Peter had lost track of time, had lost all sense of where he was, had even forgotten what it felt like to *breathe* freely, without coughing up lungfuls of water or choking on air as he hastily inhaled it.

Finally, the nightmare ended, and Peter let his head sag against his ruined chest. Water dappled his skin, and the chill seeped into his body, causing goosebumps to rise and shivers to run down his spine. His hair dropped into his eyes, wet and limp, and he could feel water droplets running down his back, tingling the lashes strewn across the flesh and soaking into his track pants. His poor, poor track pants. They didn't sign up for this, and yet here they were, soaked in blood and water. He'd really liked those pants, they'd been soft and cosy and warm. Tony's hugs had been soft and cosy and warm too - that was a fact he knew for sure. The memory of those hugs was one he revisited often, and he'd clung to it like it was actually *Tony* hugging him, and not just a figment of his imagination, for however long he'd been here.

"Hope you enjoyed the show," his handler said, though Peter couldn't see who he was directing the question to. Considering he was struggling to even lift his head from his chest, Peter thought it was a miracle he was actually lucid right now.

There was a pause, and Peter momentarily thought his handler *had* been talking to him, before Vader answered. "Yeah," the man said, and it sounded forced, even to Peter's waterlogged ears. He could have sworn he heard a gulp and a shudder coming from Vader's direction, but due to his... less than optimal state of mind he couldn't be sure. "Yes, it was very enjoyable."

"I'm glad I could entertain you," his handler answered, before turning back to Peter. During the short exchange, his energy had waned even further and he'd slumped lower in the man's clammy grip. Was it weird that he could still feel the man's unnatural moistness when Peter himself was sopping wet?

"Can you come help me put him back in the chair? I don't think we're quite done with him yet," his handler said, and Peter, even in his foggy state, was able to figure out who the man was addressing.

Vader came over, walking with his weird, stumbling gait, and grabbed Peter, half-heartedly helping his handler to drag him back to the chair. They fastened the restraints, and Peter had never been happier to be back in the chair. The familiar surface, while uncomfortable, was somewhere he could rest his aching body and just breathe in order to settle his still-gasping lungs. He realised the other two men in the room were still talking, and tuned back into the conversation, hoping he could garner some idea of what was going on. Being surprised while in the hands of HYDRA was never a good thing.

"You mind waiting here for a minute?" his handler said, obviously talking to Vader. It wasn't like Peter could go anywhere, and the man had never asked him his opinion on his incarceration anyway. "Our next little show requires a prop or two, I'm afraid. I'll be back soon."

Peter forced himself not to gulp. Whatever it was, he could take it.

He could take it. He had to take it

"No problem," Vader said. Was Peter having auditory hallucinations? The man, who had sounded

like someone was pulling on his vocal chords not two seconds earlier, now sounded relieved, happy even. He was confused, but really he just wanted to go to sleep.

The door slammed shut, and then footsteps rushed to his side. It wasn't the stumbling walk of Vader, so it must be his handler. But hadn't that guy left? It didn't matter, he didn't care that much anyway. He didn't care about much at all anymore. Just surviving from minute to minute. Speaking of surviving, people needed sleep to live right? His handler was gone... possibly, so now was as good a time as any. Maybe he could just... take a nap. A power snooze, like his Sims did (Wanda had gotten him obsessed with the game - oh how he missed her - and his Sims were probably dying without him. That or they were burning down the town).

"Peter," a voice said, and it sounded like... *Tony?*

Huh, was he dreaming? No, that wasn't right, he was in too much pain for that. He *had* been asleep though, he knew that much, and it couldn't have been for long considering the fact that he was still wet.

"Peter," the voice said, louder this time. "Kid. Peter. It's me, it's Tony. Kid?"

Tony? That wasn't right. Tony wasn't meant to be here. He wasn't meant to be in Peter's torture room at a HYDRA base. But when he fluttered his eyes open, Tony was staring down at him, eyes full of concern and looking like he hadn't slept a wink in weeks.

Tony Stark.

The Tony Stark. Iron Man. His hero. The man he'd been pining for ever since he'd been taken.

Briefly, hope sparked in the pit of his belly, warm and bright, before everything clicked into place and the spark was squashed, like an ember under the heel of a boot. "Ha, ha, ha," Peter drawled, his words slurring together a little with exhaustion. "That's...that's a good one. What is it now, drugs? I feel like it's drugs. Brainwashing doesn't work, physical torture doesn't work, so you've moved onto turning me into a hallucinating nutcase, is that it?"

"You're not hallucinating, Peter," Tony said, loudly and clearly. The man lifted a hand, and Peter flinched violently away at the sudden movement. *Danger*, his spider sense screamed, *he'll hit you, he'll take you down while you're vulnerable and leave you with memories of your da-* Tony, *hurting you. Danger danger danger.*

This was possibly the worst thing HYDRA had ever done to Peter. They'd stolen his childhood, his chance of a normal life. They'd robbed him of his freedom time and time again, and when he didn't comply with their wishes, they'd put him through endless rounds of pain and suffering. But this? This was a new low. They'd brought his family into it, the one person he felt safe around at all times, and they were going to rob him of that too. Probably get the fake-Tony to hurt him or something. What if he could never look at the real Tony again?

What if it doesn't matter, because you'll never see him again anyway?

"It's me. It's Tony. This... this isn't a dream."

Peter squinted at him, making sure the deep suspicion he felt was plain on his face, but nothing else. Not the uncertainty - because they'd gotten *everything* right, down to the shape of his nose, and it was hurting him just to even look at fake-Tony's face - and not the longing or the pain. He couldn't show how much this affected him; he couldn't let them know just how easily they'd managed to get under his skin and past his walls.

“Hmmm. I have to hand it to you guys, you really know how to work the CGI. This almost looks real,” Peter said, falling back on his old snarky ways to mask the panic roiling inside his head.

“That’s because it is,” not-Tony tried again, but Peter wasn’t having it. He couldn’t let this fake-ass idiot tear down the few defence mechanisms he had left.

“Or maybe... maybe this isn’t a hallucination,” he went on, plastering a look of mild curiosity on his face. “I guess I could be in the afterlife, or something? Yeah, that’d make more sense, although if this is the afterlife I don’t think it’s heaven. Heaven’s not supposed to hurt, is it? No, I’m fairly sure it’s not. Looks like I’ve ended up in hell, then.” He let out another humourless laugh. “Not that I’m surprised, I’ve gotta say. There was probably a cell reserved in hell with my name on it ever since my first kill.” Peter paused, considering not-Tony more closely. Was there a reason he was rambling to this imposter? Was it the overwhelming feeling of safety he experienced whenever he looked at the man’s face, even though he knew it was just a copy? Was it the fact that his spider-sense had finally shut up? Was it his last deflection technique working overtime to spare him the emotional turmoil? Peter pushed those thoughts aside in favour of continuing his rant - it felt good to talk to a familiar face, the face he wanted to see the most, even if that face was a trick, and essentially *not real*. He hadn’t talked this much to anyone in a long time.

“Although, if this is hell, I have no idea why you’re here. Last I heard, you were still alive. And even if you did die, there’s no way you’d end up in hell,” Peter said, because Tony - despite what the media and the general public said about him - was good and pure, selfless in a way that no one else was these days. Not-Tony looked sceptical though, and it was such a self-deprecating, Tony-like reaction that Peter felt his breath hitch and his heart skip a beat. That pesky spark of hope in his belly had sprung up again, and he didn’t have the wherewithal to squash it this time.

“So, it’s back to square one, then,” Peter decided. “I’m hallucinating. You people have drugged me up, made me all high and loopy. If you don’t mind me asking, what exactly have you got pumping into me right now? Whatever it is, it’s really freaking strong, this feels insanely real right now-” Not-Tony seemed to perk up, and he cut Peter off (rude, but also totally another Tony move. Had HYDRA studied the man’s mannerisms or something? Because that was lowkey creepy, though not really off-brand for the organisation).

“Your name is Peter,” not-Tony said, talking loudly to drown out Peter’s ramblings. Peter shut up immediately, watching not-Tony wearily. No one at HYDRA had called him Peter; he wasn’t even sure if they knew about the name he’d chosen for himself while out on the streets, or if it was just a dehumanisation tactic. “You used to work for HYDRA, but you don’t anymore. You escaped. You got out. You were on a mission, but a boy and his father got in the way of your target and you were about to kill them. Before you could, the boy got hurt and his father sang a lullaby to him. That lullaby was Twinkle Twinkle, and it made you remember something. Your own mother, singing that own song to you. It made you realise that you didn’t want to be with HYDRA anymore. It gave you the strength to leave.”

And just like that, Peter felt the spark of hope he’d been struggling to quash turn into a roaring inferno of *he’s here, he’s here, he’s here!* Tony had come, and the man in front of him *had* to be Tony because not another soul on Earth knew that much about Peter’s past, not even the other Avengers. Tony had come for him, he’d come and he was going to rescue Peter. He was going to take him back to the Tower and they’d see the other Avengers again. They’d stay with him while he got fixed up and there would be smiling and bantering, HYDRA would be nothing but a distant memory. Peter would be able to check on his Sims, have a shower, wash his hair. Oh God, he’d be able to put his pants in the washing machine!

“Tony?” Peter whispered, still hardly daring to believe that the man was *here*. He wouldn’t be

able to take it if this was somehow a trick. It would be too much. "It's really you?"

"It's really me, kid," Tony said, seeming to relax as Peter finally accepted that he really *was* Tony. There was simply no way HYDRA could know everything that Tony had said. Yikes, Peter had rambled at him about the afterlife. Shit. That was embarrassing, but Peter ignored the humiliation in favour of staring at the man for what felt like an age, just taking in the features that he'd missed so much.

He felt like something was absent from the room, and he realised Vader wasn't there. Where had he gone? And how had Tony gotten into Peter's torture room without the other man noticing? "But - the other guy - Darth Vader - where'd you come from?"

"Kid, I *was* Darth Vader," Tony said light-heartedly, although he looked like he was about to be sick at the statement.

Oh, *shit* . Tony had seen him being waterboarded. Shit, shit, shit. The man had seen Peter weak, he'd seen him at his weakest. What would he think of Peter now? Would he still want to rescue him? Would he still let him live at the Tower? *But* , he forced himself to take a breath, be calm and remember, *he's already seen you at your weakest. He's talked you down from countless nightmares and panic attacks. He doesn't care. It's fine, he's proved that to you more than enough times* .

"Surely you don't think so little of me that you honestly believe I wouldn't make a killer, stealthy, James Bond-style, psychopath-fooling entrance?"

"It was *you* ," Peter breathed, letting himself believe that he was safe. He'd be fine. Everything made sense now - the weird, strangled quality to Vader's voice and his apparent reluctance to join in on Peter's torture. It was *Tony* , it had *been* Tony the entire time. He was *here* . "Oh my God, oh my fucking God, it's you, Tony. You're here, you're really here, this can't be real, how is this even possible?"

"Kid, we can go over the details later," Tony interrupted, glancing nervously over his shoulder towards the door. Oh yeah, his handler had no idea Tony was actually Vader, and Vader was actually Tony.

Ha, that was so cool.

What was wrong with him?

Had the oxygen deprivation done something to his brain? Or was he delirious from exhaustion? Both were valid options.

"Listen, Peter, I have to tell you something. Natasha and Steve are here too, and they're working on shutting down HYDRA's security so that the rest of the team can come in, but until then..." He paused. "Until then," he went on, voice shaking slightly, "I'm not supposed to do anything, I can't get rid of this jackass. You're going to have to hold on, all right? I'm so, so, sorry Pete, but you're gonna have to go through this just a little longer."

The man's words were cut off by the door slamming open, and before Peter's foggy brain could properly process what was happening, Tony - *he was here, he was actually here* - was shooting upright and pulling the mask back on. Vader was back, his presence showing in the rigidity of Tony's posture and the few, stumbling steps he took away from Peter, as if it pained him to do so.

"Well, I'm back," a voice announced, and Peter jerked at the familiar tone of his handler, who sounded way too happy to mean anything even remotely good. "And I've brought a new gift to

try.”

Peter’s head turned involuntarily from where he’d been ogling Tony-Vader at his handler’s words. The man himself was standing near the closed door, grinning wickedly, but that wasn’t what caused Peter’s throat to close up and his heart to stutter erratically in his chest.

No.

That particular reaction was thanks to the long, dark poker his handler was clutching in his pudgy hand, or, more specifically, the white-hot tip of said poker.

Peter’s brain may have been a bit slow due to - days? Weeks? - of mistreatment, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew that the poker, gripped in his handler’s tight fist, was not to stoke a pleasant fire in order to heat up the unnaturally cold room. He considered himself a pessimist; that way, he would always be right, or pleasantly surprised, no matter what happened. However, even his pessimistic mindset was struggling to come to terms with the implications the poker brought with it.

“You sure you don’t want a turn, Lowcroft?” his handler offered to Tony, who blanched, but did nothing else. He made no move to stop his handler, who was venturing dangerously close to where Peter sat. Why wasn’t Tony doing anything to help Peter? Come to think of it, the man hadn’t done anything to help him during waterboarding either, though it looked like it had nearly killed him to do so.

And then Tony’s words from before hit Peter, and he understood. ‘Natasha and Steve are here too... shutting down security... hold on... sorry, sorry...’

There was a plan in motion, the others were coming, but Peter would have to deal with just a little more torture. Tony couldn’t bust him out until Steve and Nat had shut down the security systems - a feat that could take God knew how long.

All he had to do was get through a little bit of torture. Just a little bit more, and then he and Tony could blow this popsicle stand. And in the meantime he’d make Tony’s job easier - the man had already done so much for him, and now he was going to save him from HYDRA, for the second time. He could make this easy for Tony. No screaming, no flinching, no negative reactions of any kind. He could do this. Just a little longer.

“I always find that participating, rather than just spectating, leaves me feeling particularly satisfied,” the handler added, obviously trying to convince Tony.

“Trust me, watching everything unfold is satisfying enough,” Tony said, sounding like he was trying to force bile back down his throat. To be fair, he probably was.

“Well, can’t say I’m disappointed,” his handler shrugged. “All the more fun for me, I guess.” Then, turning back to Peter, he raised the scalding-hot poker high, so that the horrifyingly red tip glowed against the dark canvas of the ceiling. “See this, Asset?” His handler whispered, voice coated in sickening glee. “It’s called a fire poker, and I’ve just spent five minutes cooking it up nicely in some heated coals, making it about as hot as an actual fire itself.”

“Really? I’d worked that much out for myself, funnily enough,” Peter replied easily, gathering all the strength he’d managed to collect in his time there. Just a little longer. “It’s called common sense, dickhead. When you stick something in a fire, it becomes - and now this is a real shock - hot. Not that I’d expect you to understand, the education down here *is* pretty poorly funded...guess that’s just a nasty side effect of spending all your big bucks on freezers to turn people into Icy Poles.”

His handler growled and drew back his hand, slapping Peter hard across the face. Peter didn't flinch, which spoke of his bone deep tiredness and renewed determination.

Just a little longer .

"Tell me about the Avengers," his handler said in a low voice, all traces of the twisted joy from before gone. Peter was getting really tired of the same question, and it was so vague too. The man was practically asking for even vaguer answers. "Or so help me, you little shit, I'll deep fry every inch of your skin with this poker."

"Oh, joy, another game! This should be fun," Peter grinned, injecting every drop of strength he had into his expression, hoping it painted his face with fierce determination so his handler knew just how hard Peter was going to make his life. "I've always wanted to be turned into a French fry."

"You'll be turned into much worse than that," his handler hissed. "Want a demonstration?"

And then, before Peter had time to bite out another snarky remark, the sadist lurched towards him, caterpillar moustache flopping as he did so, and pressed the poker hard into the bare skin of his chest.

The pain was indescribable, red-hot and searing, it raced up and down his entire body in waves, stemming from the point where the poker made contact with his skin. His already tender chest - aching from the distress it had been put under lately - shuddered under the metal, and he drew in a gasping breath before slamming his head against the back of the chair. It only brought him more pain, but it almost took his mind off the much bigger issue currently pressing into his chest, if only for a moment.

The urge to scream was almost overpowering, and Peter bit down on his lip hard enough to draw blood, but it was enough to keep his vocal expression of the agony at bay. He couldn't scream, he couldn't make Tony's job harder than it already was. The man looked like he needed a few decent meals and at least a week's worth of sleep, and while Peter knew he probably wasn't looking much better at the moment, he was enhanced. All he needed was a hot shower and a few hours of decent sleep, maybe a hot meal, and he'd be right as rain after a day.

He just could not scream .

"Ouch," his handler said mockingly, and Peter struggled with the urge to do something rather violent and not at all socially acceptable to the man. Judging by the way Tony's entire body was twitching, the man's thought process was currently on a similar route to Peter's. The poker was withdrawn to reveal an ugly, blistering, red-raw mark on his chest, and he winced at the sight of it, deciding to push the pain associated with it away in order to focus on staying conscious, which was a lot harder than it sounded. He'd gotten so good at compartmentalising since his capture - who knew that being held against your will and tortured by the man who had ruled your childhood with an iron fist would help with learning new skills?

"That does look painful. How would you like the rest of your body to look like that, Asset?"

Peter didn't gulp, he didn't! He didn't picture his entire body resembling the bright, pulsing red mark on his chest, didn't imagine the accompanying pain such a thing would bring, didn't think about Tony having to watch it all either. He definitely did not. Instead, he opened his mouth and casually let out yet another sassy remark. He was getting great at those too - was being kidnapped actually a twisted kind of learning experience?

"Well, red *is* my best colour," Peter drawled, smirking up at his handler.

“I guess we’ll have to test that, then,” the man snarled, approaching slowly and giving off a general vibe of maliciousness that Peter wasn't really digging. At all. Vibe check failed. However, he unfortunately didn't have time to point out the negative implications that came with having the wrong vibe, because his handler lurched forward and slammed the poker into his shoulder, and Peter was suddenly a little preoccupied.

It was the exact same pain all over again. Radiating out along his body and spiking each time the man pressed the metal a little harder into his skin. The torture seemed to last forever, minutes stretching and warping into what felt like hours, days maybe.

Finally it ended, but the pain stayed, lingering like a shadow, an unwelcome guest. Soon it doubled, then tripled, when his handler added burn after burn to his torso, again and again.

By the time it was over, Peter was barely conscious. His breathing was fast and ragged, and his head was pounding furiously. His lip was bleeding from the number of times he'd pressed his teeth into it to stop himself from screaming, but it had worked. He hadn't let a single sound escape his lips.

He was sure that if he had the energy to look at his torso he'd see a multitude of burn marks littering the area and varying in severity. Sometimes his handler had only pressed the poker onto his skin for a few seconds, but other times the man had held it there for minutes, cackling at the look of agony on Peter's face.

The smell of his own, burnt flesh was sickening, alarming and pervasive all at once. He'd smelled burnt flesh before, was familiar with the odour, even. He'd been the cause of many fires and bombs that had resulted in too many burned victims to count, but knowing that the gruesome smell came from his own body disarmed him in a way that he hadn't experienced before.

Sweat was rolling down his face, the salty drops falling onto his chest and mercilessly stinging the barely-starting-to-heal cuts and new burns scattered across the surface. His muscles ached from seizing every time the poker had made contact with his skin, and he was pretty sure he'd accidentally fractured his wrist while thrashing against his restraints during a particularly long session of contact between his skin and the poker.

The torture had slowed momentarily, and Peter's strength was all but drained. His limbs were jelly, flopping limply in the chair. He tried to move a finger, but only succeeded in twitching it pathetically. The great, unstoppable Spider, reduced to nothing but a weak, hopeless prisoner.

He'd once been the one that did the torturing, but now the tables had turned and the irony was, quite literally, *painful*. Faceless bodies that he'd been ordered to get information out of again and again. He said faceless because they'd always had sacks over their heads, which had frustrated Peter at the time. He thought that HYDRA didn't trust him enough to show him who he was getting much needed intel out of. Now though, he thanked everything all the way up to high heaven that he hadn't seen their identities. The people he tortured would have been just a few of the endless cycle of faces he saw in his nightmares - people he'd killed, people he'd betrayed, people he'd left behind. Back then, before he'd broken out of HYDRA's control, Peter had been like a cyclone, always moving, always destroying. Now, he was the calm after the storm, or maybe he was just the eye of the storm - tranquil for now, but unpredictable and dangerous because of the inevitable second wave of devastation to come.

He'd figure that out later though, because right now, he didn't have enough brain power to properly move his own finger, let alone figure out which part of a cyclone he most closely resembled.

Peter had sort of zoned out when the poker had stopped making contact with his skin for a

relatively long period of time, but when he started to focus, he realised his handler was talking. Again. That man just did not shut up.

“See, Asset? Didn’t I tell you?” he tormented. “No one’s coming. Your Avenger friends, the ones you were so sure were going to come rescue you - look around, Asset! I don’t see them! Where’s Captain America, your so-called *inspiration*? Where’s Thor, the self-proclaimed god? Where’s the Black Widow? Where’s Iron Man?”

The irony in that statement - wow, that particular rhetorical device was making quite an appearance in his life lately - was almost enough to make Peter laugh. As it was, he was too tired to laugh. He was too tired to do anything anymore. Maybe he could just... take a nap. Tony would wake him up when shit started to get real. No diggity no doubt.

Peter had just enough time to hear, “right fucking here, you asshole” and think *oh damn, that man is so cool*, before almost all of his senses ceased to work.

The last thing he saw was Tony Stark’s livid expression and a fist connecting with his handler’s face - *aw, I had dibs on first punch, Tony* - before his vision faded to black and he finally passed out.

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Tony only allowed himself a moment to admire his handiwork, staring down with satisfaction at the twisted, sick excuse for a man that he’d just beaten to unconsciousness in a matter of seconds. It was a testament to the intensity of his anger that he’d been able to take the guy out so quickly - a fully-trained HYDRA operative would usually have required much more effort on Tony’s part, particularly without the aid of his trusty suit - but vengeance and uncontrollable rage, it appeared, were tremendous assistants when it came to winning fights.

“I’ve secured room J8,” he said into his earpiece. “Peter’s here.”

“Oh my god,” Natasha breathed. “Is he okay?”

“Is he hurt?” Steve added.

“He’s...” Tony paused, trailing off as he glanced over at Peter and saw that - *shit* - the kid was still and unmoving in his chair, eyes closed and head drooped against the ruined flesh of his torso.

“He’s - give me a second. You guys opened the security gates, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve confirmed. “Why?”

“I need a suit,” Tony explained curtly, before promptly changing the frequency of his earpiece to address FRIDAY instead.

“Suit me up, FRI.”

As his Iron Man suit flew into the room and connected with Tony’s body, piece by piece, he rushed to Peter’s side and crouched in front of the kid’s chair.

“Kid,” he said loudly. “Can you hear me? Peter?”

There was no response. Feeling a coil of anxiety twist in his gut, Tony turned just in time to catch his faceplate, which he immediately fixed into position.

“FRIDAY. Run vitals. Now.”

“Yes, boss,” FRIDAY replied shortly, apparently recognising the urgency in Tony’s voice. There was a second’s silence, and then she replied, “*Weak heartbeat detected. Breathing shallow and irregular.*”

Though this reading was far from healthy, it still caused a bolt of relief to shoot through Tony, because *barely alive* was significantly better than *dead*.

“*He has lost a critical amount of blood, boss. Immediate pressure to all wounds is recommended.*”

“Right, pressure, got it,” Tony muttered frantically, opening his suit to shrug out of his HYDRA jacket. Leaning over Peter, he fashioned the blasted piece of clothing into a sort of half-bandage, half-tourniquet; the jacket was so large, and Peter’s frame so comparatively thin, that it could, mercifully, wrap around his injuries entirely. “Alright. Is there anything else I can do?”

“No, boss,” came FRIDAY’s response. “*He needs medical attention, and quickly. You should swiftly return to the Tower.*”

“Yeah, well, that’s the plan,” Tony muttered. “Only problem is, I can’t carry Pete and fight off these HYDRA nutjobs at the same time-” He broke off, thinking quickly, before a sudden idea occurred to him. “FRIDAY, send in the suit Steve was using. Chuck it into autopilot mode, will you?”

Half a minute later, the aforementioned suit had flown into the godforsaken torture room, moving swiftly under FRIDAY’s control. Tony stood up and quickly undid the restraints around Peter’s wrists and ankles, before carefully lifting the kid out of the wooden chair, struggling to be as gentle as possible, so as not to aggravate Peter’s wounds.

“Take him,” he said to the empty suit, passing Peter’s limp form over to the AI-controlled suit. “Be as gentle as you can, all right? He’s bleeding a lot. And stay behind me, whatever you do. Don’t go off on your own, you won’t be able to fight anyone off while you’re holding him.”

“*Got it, boss,*” FRIDAY answered.

Swallowing past the panic that was steadily building in his throat, Tony raised a hand and switched his earpiece back to Steve and Natasha. He was growing more edgy by the second - a fight of epic proportions lay ahead of them, he knew, and one that he’d been eagerly anticipating ever since this fucked-up organisation laid a hand on Peter, but the issue was, *they didn’t have time for an epic fight right now*. As much as Tony wanted to make every last HYDRA agent suffered, Peter was currently fighting death in one of his suit’s arms, and he needed Bruce. And the Med Bay. Immediately.

“Okay, Peter is alive,” Tony announced, ignoring the nausea that roiled in his stomach at the fact that he even had to confirm this. “I’ve got him with me, we’re about to-”

“Tony!” Natasha’s cry interrupted him. “I’m looking at the comms, you’ve got incoming, *now* !”

Tony turned towards the door just as five HYDRA agents burst in, and raised his repulsers.

That's that, we hope it lived up to all of your expectations!

We left you on yet another one of our famed cliffhangers and we have no regrets :D

Please leave kudos or comment - that kind of stuff makes our week!



# Mouse Trap

## Chapter Notes

Andddd we're back with another chapter, once again sporting one of our infamous puns, which you'll figure out soon enough \*cackles\*. This one's pretty action-packed, so buckle your seatbelts and get ready for some hardcore, HYDRA ass-kicking action that you've all been waiting for...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They had guns, but guns were easy. Guns, Tony could deal with, just like he'd done countless times in the past. His suit cut through their rapid fire like a knife through butter, some weird combination of rage, vengeance and a whole lot of adrenaline fuelling him onwards. If these bastards really thought they could take down Iron Man himself with a few assault rifles, they needed to severely reconsider their tactics.

He took them each out with one repulsor hit, sending all five of them consecutively hurtling through the left wall. He would have loved to do a hell of a lot more to them, as well, but the delicate plan they'd spent hours crafting back in the Tower still weighed heavily on Tony's mind, and as much as he desperately wanted to give these dickheads a taste of their own medicine, he knew Natasha would kill him if he blew the plan for a small moment of oh-so-sweet revenge.

Plus, there was the whole problem of Peter. Still unconscious, barely breathing. Tony would be able to breathe freely again once the kid was safely being checked out by Bruce in the Med Bay.

"Just took care of all five," he announced to Natasha and Steve through the earpiece.

"Wow, did I miss something, or did you just win a fight without the help of a fifteen-year-old karate kid?" came another voice, one that most definitely was not Natasha's or Steve's.

Tony's heart lifted, just a little.

"Rhodey? Am I dreaming or is that you, pal?"

"You bet it's me, I've come to crash the party," his best friend confirmed. "What, you think we were gonna let you guys have all the fun?"

They'd made it, Tony realised. All of them. Rhodey, Sam, Bruce, Wanda, Vision, Clint and Thor.

"Oh, thank God," came Steve's voice. "I need at least three of you right now, I've got about twenty coming my way and more are being deployed as we speak."

"On it," said Bruce. "Where are you? Thor, Sam and I can come help."

"The main floor near the exit. Get Nat to direct you over the comms, we've gotta clear this area so that she, Tony and Peter can escape from the lower levels."

"Okay," Sam said, "but just so you guys know, getting out won't be a problem, as soon as Nat disabled the systems we kinda just blew a big-ass hole in the cliff face with the missiles from the quinjet."

“Well, good to know those things finally went to use,” Tony muttered. “Hey, FRI, pick up the pace, we gotta get out of here.”

The AI-controlled suit carrying Peter nodded and sped up, walking fast behind Tony. They exited the godforsaken torture room, much to Tony’s relief - another minute in that hellhole and he was sure he would’ve lost it - and started making their way down the corridor, Tony in the lead. It felt like days ago that he’d been struggling to find Peter, wandering aimlessly down these dark underground corridors, and he had to strain his memory to remember the way he’d come, ignoring the more-than-slightly distracting sounds of Natasha directing the team towards Steve’s location over his earpiece.

“Tony, watch out,” she warned him, in between instructions. “You could run into some trouble up ahead.”

“Duly noted,” Tony muttered, glancing behind him to check that the second suit was still following, which it was, Peter’s limp form in its arms. He raised his repulsors, ready to fire the minute he saw any sign of movement, but the corridor remained eerily empty. It was almost worse than actually fighting; the anticipation was twisting his gut, sending nausea roiling in his stomach, and he’d much rather be punching the living daylights out of some HYDRA agents than this tense, but violence-free, apprehension.

“Okay, Nat, the team made it,” Steve told Natasha. “Everyone who’s not Tony, Peter or Nat, work on clearing this floor completely so we can get out of here. Natasha, you can ditch the comms now and make your way out - Tony, you keep doing what you’re doing as well. If any of you need backup, let us know.”

“Got it,” said Natasha.

“Cool,” Tony said. “I’m just about to-”

He was cut off suddenly as the head of a large, heavy rifle was rammed against his helmet. Tony staggered backwards slightly, a red light flashing in his mask that indicated the armour’s integrity had been slightly damaged-

*Jesus, forget your armour. Are you gonna start punching, or what?*

Tony ducked as the HYDRA agent aimed a second blow with the gun, turning around and blasting a repulsor at him, which he promptly dodged. He was obviously good, much more experienced than the five agents he’d taken down in the torture room, and Tony could see two more agents jogging up behind him, coming in for backup. Before they could get too carried away with their rifles, he activated his flight power and flipped over their heads, raining down repulsor fire on all three of them. Two of the agents promptly passed out but the third was proving to be more of a cockroach - Tony gritted his teeth and increased the thrust capacity on his flight power, before ramming his feet down hard on the HYDRA agent’s head. The agent let out a cry of pain and crumpled to the floor, knocked out cold.

Knocking out HYDRA agents cold turned out to be an immensely satisfying process, Tony discovered. As they rounded the corner up ahead, he saw ten more of the scumbags approaching him, once again armed with rifles whose bullets couldn’t have dented his armour even if they’d all been fired simultaneously. It was almost therapeutic, he had to admit, taking them out one by one with his repulsors; sometimes he got more creative, using some of his new nanotechnology instead, and even being so gracious as to blowtorch one agent to an early grave (he hadn’t really meant to murder the guy, as such, but he had been aiming a series of extremely annoying knocks to Tony’s head while he’d been dealing with another agent, and if there was one way to piss Tony off, it was by damaging his armour integrity). Admittedly, Tony would have loved to dish out a lot worse to

all of these agents, but it was Peter's unstable state of unconsciousness that drove him forwards, restraining him from taking the time to fully pummel the agents. The kid was still limp and unmoving in the suit's arms behind him, and with every minute that passed, his breathing seemed to become steadily shallower.

"FRIDAY, run his vitals again," Tony demanded for what felt like the millionth time, once there was a break in the onslaught of HYDRA agents.

*"Not good, boss. Heart rate is still faint, and his blood loss has reached-"*

WHAM.

Tony whirled around so fast he saw stars, and turned just in time to grab Peter's ankles as a HYDRA agent tugged at his arms, yanking him away from the Iron Man suit, which he'd evidently tried to shoot down.

*I swear, when are these morons going to learn that bullets don't work on solid metal armour?*

"Get the fuck off him," he growled at the HYDRA agent, hauling Peter free of the man's grasp-

-but right before he could, what had to be at least twenty separate machine guns started raining fire down on Tony's armour, and if he hadn't been too busy trying to see through the relentless onslaught of bullets, he would have laughed at his bad karma. It would make perfect sense that as soon as he started dissing HYDRA for trying to take him down with assault rifles, they came in with twenty of the fastest-loading machine guns in existence.

They weren't breaking the armour - sleepless nights though he'd been having, Tony's mechanical skills were still as good as they'd ever been, and he'd build this suit just as impenetrably tough as the others - but they were sure as hell affecting his vision, and he felt his grasp start to falter on Peter, unable to see what was going on. Blindly, Tony raised an arm in the direction of the gunfire and started firing his repulsors, still groping with his other arm for Peter's ankle, which he had now lost entirely - panic built up in his throat, and he fought to swallow it down -

"FRIDAY, activate the repulsors on your suit and shoot in the direction of the guns like crazy!" Tony yelled, hoping that his AI would be able to hear him over the sound of relentless gunfire. Swearing loudly, he activated his flight power again and soared over the herd of HYDRA agents, deciding that now would be as good a time as any to, quite literally, burn these HYDRA agents to the ground. With the AI-controlled suit still firing its repulsors at the agents, Tony finished the job with some well-aimed jets of fire, effectively setting the entire assault force alight. He didn't stick around to see the aftermath; zooming past FRIDAY's suit, he caught sight of Peter, being dragged away by about half a dozen HYDRA agents.

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit.*

He couldn't let them take him again. If they got him a second time, there was absolutely no way he'd be able to get him back. Not now that they'd blown their cover.

Tony let out a burst of speed and urged his suit forwards, preparing to reach Peter and take out the agents-

BAM.

A door to his left suddenly burst open, and before Tony knew what was happening, he was colliding with someone - the speed of his suit knocked the person over, and they crashed to the ground, tumbling head over heels - Tony was on his feet first, raising his arm to fire a repulsor, but

before he could so much as aim, the hand was knocked away with such force that for a second, Tony was sure he was fighting some strange replica of the Iron Man suit itself.

But it wasn't a suit of armour he was fighting. Not in the literal sense, at least.

Tony instantly recognised the uniform on the man. It was the same one he'd been forced to wear, earlier, when they'd snuck in as Winter Soldiers.

And it looked as though he'd just run into another one of the blasted robotic, brainwashed murderers.

"I have eyes on the secondary target," he heard the Soldier mutter into an earpiece. "Bring in backup-"

"I don't think so, buddy," Tony snarled, raising his fist and clocking the Soldier in the jaw before he could finish the message. "Your little posse isn't coming to find you anytime-"

WHAM. The Soldier retaliated with a punch of his own, and Tony was once again staggered by the full force of the blow. Damn. These Soldier people were *good*.

Then again, it shouldn't have really come as a surprise. Peter had been a Soldier once, as well, and Tony knew all too well how hard the kid could punch.

"-on Corridor J," the Soldier finished.

*Shit.*

Tony righted himself and sent a repulsor blast the Soldier's way, but the man grabbed his arm and redirected the blast, sending it hurtling into the concrete wall instead. The force of the explosion rebounded, and they went tumbling back, crashing to the floor, and Tony was all too aware that Peter was being dragged further and further away with every second that he had to waste fighting this asshole-

*Okay. Finish him off quick. No theatrics.*

Tony activated the nanotech launcher on his left arm and slammed the studded metal weapon into the Soldier's face, effectively knocking him back and away from Tony. The Soldier came at him almost immediately in retaliation, sending a flying kick that Tony narrowly dodged by sending himself flying towards the ceiling. Blasting to the side to quickly surprise the Soldier, he dropped low and sent another nanotech kick hurtling across the Soldier's face, and the man tumbled backwards, blood streaming from his face - Tony landed on top of him, raised his repulsors, and blasted the shit out of the guy.

*There. Easy.*

It was all he had time to think before the six other Winter Soldiers burst in and started punching.

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Peter had just one memory of his biological father. Really, it was more of a flash of imagery than a memory. A man, tall and fair, with brown hair just like Peter's, bending towards him and holding a

small, silvery fish. There were fishing rods in the background of that image, so Peter, being the deductive genius that he was, assumed they'd been going fishing.

Peter remembered reaching out with his pudgy little hands, trusting without fail that whatever his father was holding out to him wouldn't harm him. What did it feel like to trust someone so implicitly? That was something he most definitely couldn't remember.

The sensation of a slimy fish in his hands was embedded in his memory forever though, just like the sound of his mother's voice. He remembered the way he'd squealed when his father had deposited it in his grasp, remembered how the fish had struggled in his hands - Peter hadn't known it then, but that fish was struggling to breathe. He felt bad now that he knew what it felt like to have the oxygen he so craved taken away. Did fish even breathe oxygen? He didn't know, his brain was fuzzy and weird.

Peter hadn't liked the feeling of that fish in his hands. He hadn't liked the feel of the oddly smooth scales underneath his fingertips, or the writhing muscles, coiled and tensed under the fish's skin. It had terrified him at the time, so he'd dropped the fish and clambered away, watching in horror as the fish wiggled and squirmed on the ground until his father had picked it up and thrown it back in.

His consciousness was currently akin to that fish, slipping and sliding in and out of his grasp, no matter how desperately he tried to hold onto it. The last thing he remembered before his consciousness had slipped out of his grasp was Tony punching his handler in the face - which had been *awesome* - except that wasn't what was happening now.

Because now he was surrounded by a bunch of not-so-nice-looking dudes and one of them was dragging him down a hallway by his ankles. Tony was nowhere in sight, though if he strained his ears he could hear a lot of grunting and thumping coming from the opposite direction he was being dragged. Now, Peter wasn't exactly lucid, and he was pretty sure he was missing at least several key points in the sequence of events that had led him up to this moment, but he knew one thing: *HYDRA will always take you where you don't want to go*.

Judging by the fact that the big, beefy dudes surrounding him were a) dressed in HYDRA uniforms, and b) dragging him deeper into the HYDRA base, Peter decided these guys were definitely HYDRA, and they definitely weren't taking him where he wanted to go, which was back to Tony.

He was weak, weaker than he'd ever felt before. The action of being dragged along a concrete floor was painfully ripping open his old wounds and the blood was starting to flow freely again. He could see a gruesome trail of red liquid glistening behind him, like some sort of horror-movie-esque 'Hansel & Gretel' parody. Clint would surely wet his pants if he saw it - the man loved to talk the big talk, but when it came down to it he was a total wimp.

Once his slightly hysterical brain was finished over-analysing the path of blood trailing behind him, reality set in. He was so close to being rescued, so close that he could literally hear the sounds of fighting above him. The Avengers had come, they hadn't abandoned him, they hadn't decided he wasn't worth the effort. They were here, and Peter was so close to securing his freedom - he wasn't going to let HYDRA steal it from him yet again.

He struggled, kicking out and thrashing his arms, ignoring the pain that each movement caused. His collarbone ached fiercely where one of the Winter Soldiers had broken it during the early days of his torture, and he could have sworn he could feel the broken segment digging into the skin

above it. He didn't have time to worry about that now though, because he had a different, and much more pressing, objective in mind, and that was breaking free.

So he continued to kick and struggle, feeling like he completely understood how that fish had felt all those years ago. He'd struggled to breathe, and it almost felt like there was still water sloshing around inside of him somewhere. Now he was struggling to escape, to be freed from the tight hands restricting his feeble movements. Ironically, the chorus of 'I Want To Break Free' by Queen started playing in his head on repeat, and Peter had never before been so done with himself.

Soon enough, exhaustion overtook his need to escape, and his movements slowed. He tried screaming for help, hoping against hope that somehow Tony would get away from whatever was preventing him from coming after Peter - because he was now sure that the man wouldn't leave his side unless he was being forcibly dragged away by his goatee - but his voice came out as nothing more than a breath, barely a sound, let alone something that would alert Tony to his location.

Honestly, his future was looking rather grim. All he wanted was to go home, to curl up in bed with Tony and have him read another book. Preferably *Harry Potter* - he wanted to see how the Triwizard Tournament was going to end. Tony had promised to read him the last few chapters of the book after he got home from the press conference, but due to... er, *unfortunate circumstances*, that had never happened.

Salvation was growing further and further away as the HYDRA agents continued to drag him through the maze of corridors, and deeper into the heart of the base. Where were they taking him? Back to his torture room? He actually had no idea where that was thanks to the fact that he'd only been outside it - and conscious - once, so he had no way of knowing if that was where they were going, though it seemed unlikely. Surely they weren't dumb enough to take him back to the one place the Avengers - or at least Tony - knew he could be.

Maybe they were dragging him to an alternate exit so they could escape the base without being stopped by the Avengers. That seemed more likely, and while Peter commended them for the way they'd thought this plan through, he also cursed them. Why couldn't they just let him be? He wasn't worth all this - surely they could make another assassin.

The whole scenario reminded him of a five-year-old he'd seen squabbling with her mother at the playground down the street from the Tower. He and Tony had been going for a walk through the park, trying to burn off some energy and get some fresh air, when they'd caught sight of the pair.

"Gimme the barbie," the little girl had said, her blonde pigtails swinging as she shook her head.

"You've already got a barbie," the mother had replied, her tone full of exhaustion and looking like she was questioning her choice to even have a child in the first place. Peter himself didn't understand the appeal of chaining yourself down to one person for eighteen plus years, when there was a high chance that more than half of those years would be spent listening to that person whining. It just didn't sound like a fun experience.

"But I want *that* barbie," the girl whined, and the look of pure, put-upon exasperation on the mother's face had sent both Peter and Tony into a round of hysterical laughter.

HYDRA was basically that five-year-old girl. They didn't want just any assassin, they wanted *Peter*, even if he was really just a massive drain on resources due to his newfound resistance to the wiping process.

But, if they really wanted him, Peter was essentially doomed, especially seeing as they had him in their grasp now, when he was already so severely weakened. HYDRA would stop at nothing to get what they wanted, and that was Peter, so he was kind of screwed.

“Hey, assholes!” a voice yelled, high pitched and cracking on the last syllable.

Huh, maybe I'm not screwed, Peter thought as he turned around at the new voice. There, standing in the middle of the deserted corridor, in all his scrawny gloriousness, was Mousy, holding a gun that looked to be the same size as him - was Mousy actually really strong? It would make sense, if he'd gone through even half the training Peter had.

The guy looked as sick as a dog, pale and trembling - or maybe he was just terrified, Peter could relate - but he stood his ground, adjusting his grip on the ridiculously huge gun. He locked eyes with Peter for a second, giving a small nod, and Peter reciprocated the gesture. He knew that Mousy wasn't all that bad - likely just a guy in a bad situation with no way out.

“Why don't you pick on someone your own size?” Mousy growled, and he hefted the huge gun onto his shoulder. *Damn*, Peter thought, *I'm getting front row seats to all the cool action movie moments today, aren't I?*

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“Backup. Guys, I need backup. *Now*.”

He could barely speak through the torrent of relentless punches they were raining down on him, endless and vicious and forceful, each one sending lights popping off in Tony's brain. Whether the team could understand his requests through the comms, or would even have the time to help him given the fact that they were all currently tied up in their own fights, were two very slim possibilities, and these mind-controlled soldiers did not appear to be letting up anytime soon. His faceplate was cracked and dented, and blood was streaming down his face, his left eye swelling up painfully.

“Winter Soldiers,” he tried again through the earpiece. “Six - six of them. They're not giving up easy, let's just say that-”

His voice was cut off as a particularly well-aimed punch hit his throat, effectively knocking the wind out of him, and Tony gasped. He was painfully aware that Peter was still being dragged out of his reach, further and further away - how long would it be before he couldn't find the kid, in this underground maze? How long would it be before he was lost again, this time forever?

*No way. Once was bad enough, but are you seriously going to let the same mistake happen twice in a fucking row?*

Tony gritted his teeth and, with all his might, raised his repulsors. He managed to catch one in the face, but the damage did little; five of them were still on him, and they were even stronger than he'd originally anticipated. He didn't think he'd be able to even activate his nanotech in this state - that required movement - practically every weapon on his suit did-

*Shit, Stark, you are the world's worst genius, you know that?*

Realising what his only option was, Tony quickly activated his flight power and thrust them

forwards, and his suit slipped out from under the Winter Soldier's grasp. He redirected his suit above them, out of his reach.

"FRIDAY, find Peter," he told the AI suit. "Once you get a location on him, stay with him and let me know. The nightmare tracker working?"

"No, boss," FRIDAY replied. *"His heart rate is too weak to be detected."*

"Shit," Tony muttered. "Okay, well we're gonna have to do it the old fashioned way, I guess. Get moving."

He was distracted almost immediately by one of the Winter Soldiers, who was grabbing at his ankle and tugging his suit back down - growling, Tony turned and aimed an explosive blast at the guy with his repulsors - he fell back, hard, colliding with several of the other Soldiers, but by some miracle, they all got up again immediately after, brushing themselves off as if Tony had jabbed them with a mini-golf stick, rather than hit one of them with a fatal repulsor blast.

*Curse those stupid HYDRA enhancements.*

"Guys, I dunno if I can make this any clearer," he said into his earpiece. "Everything's gone to shit, I've lost Peter, and there's about six of these cronies surrounding me. Steve, Bruce, Thor, anyone, some help would be nice-"

"I think they can send Wanda and Vision over to help you out," Natasha yelled, over noises that sounded vaguely like a third world war was taking place over where the team was battling the rest of HYDRA. "I could also use a hand down here, it's getting a bit out of control-"

"I'll send Wanda and Vision your way, Tony," Steve agreed. "What's your location?"

"Corridor J, it's underground, west quadrant-"

Tony broke off suddenly as three of the Soldiers vaulted off the wall beside them and flipped into the air, grabbing Tony and attempting to haul him back down. Increasing the thrust capacity on his flight power, he activated his nanotech and used it to flip two of them onto his back, where the third one had already grabbed, before ramming them all into the wall behind him with all his force. One hit evidently wasn't enough for these guys, so Tony repeated the process again, and again, and again, until he was sure he'd knocked at least one of them out. The other two were still clinging on, though, and Tony was again reminded strongly of a pair of particularly immortal cockroaches. One of them flipped over his helmet and grabbed onto his left hand, pushing off the ceiling and twisting his whole arm back with such force that Tony felt his wrist break.

"Alright," he muttered, wincing in pain, "time to bug spray the roaches."

He raised a hand and activated his blowtorch, aiming it at the Soldier's face, but the second Soldier grabbed the weapon before he could fire it, pulling Tony backwards along with it. Tony pointed his leg up at the guy and fired a repulsor blast strong enough to knock down several buildings - the Soldier went blasting backwards, crumpling into the wall, and finally it looked like he'd had the decency to pass out - but he'd lost control of his flight power in the process, and Tony swore as he went tumbling down with the third Soldier, landing right next to where the other three still stood, practically unscathed.

"You got separation anxiety, or something?" he snarled at the third Soldier, who was still firmly attached around his neck. "What's with the clinginess, buddy?"

By way of response, the Soldier flipped over him and slammed him into the ground. Tony knew he



had about a millisecond window before they'd all be on him again, and there was no way he could beat four of these guys in hand-to-hand combat - scrambling to his feet, he activated his nanotech and pushed backwards off two of the Soldiers, sending them stumbling to the floor - he landed, but before he could even charge his repulsors again, one of the Soldiers grabbed him around the neck and dragged him backwards, attempting to crush through the armourplate - Tony kicked out with his feet and blasted the guy forwards, flipping him over his head and aiming a punch at his gut as he went over - but the bastard's grip strength was annoyingly well-honed, and he managed to keep a hold of Tony as he tumbled backwards, bringing him down to the floor with him, which was absolutely the last place Tony wanted to be-

"Hey, assholes. You might want to move out of the way."

Tony glanced up just in time to see two glowing balls of red light expand into a small explosion that filled the whole corridor. Hurriedly, he blasted himself out of the firing line, flying down the corridor to safety as the four remaining Winter Soldiers were entirely encapsulated in the glowing scarlet sphere, which gradually shrunk, growing denser and denser and compacting in on itself until the Soldiers were forced into a space about three feet wide, before the orb exploded outwards. The four Winter Soldiers were blasted down the corridor, hitting the concrete walls with such force that they hurtled all the way through, very clearly knocked out during the process.

Tony turned and saw Wanda Maximoff facing him, both hands raised in her customary combat pose with Vision behind her.

"Whoa," he said, letting out a low whistle through his teeth. "Tell your telekinesis I owe her one."

Wanda raised a dry eyebrow at him. "Really, Stark? That's the best compliment you can manage?"

Tony shrugged. "I like to keep the loss of my dignity to an absolute minimum at all times. It's one of the more-" He abruptly stopped talking in favour of FRIDAY'S voice.

*"I found him, boss. He's awake, from what I can see, and my diagnostics suggest that he over-exerted himself attempting to resist the agents transporting him. They have all stopped, though I cannot detect the reason."*

"Of course he did," Tony muttered, shaking his head at Peter's apparent inability to discern between minor injuries that could be ignored while fighting, and severe, life-threatening, definitely-don't-fight-if-you-sustain-one injuries. "All right, send me your location. I've got Wanda and Vision with me, we're coming for him now."

He turned to Wanda and Vision, who had taken in this apparently entirely one-sided conversation with more than a little confusion.

"FRIDAY found Peter," he told them. "Come on folks, it's time for take two on that rescue."

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After Mousy's action movie-worthy line, Peter was ashamed to admit he blacked out for a little bit. Could you blame him, though, all things considered? He'd managed to work himself into a panic while fighting against the HYDRA agent's hold - though it was more like a pathetic struggle, given his current state - and his racing heart and spider-sense-induced headache had done nothing to help his already-injured body. As soon as the tingle at the nape of his neck had died down just a little

(an event which coincided with Mousy's arrival), he had no chance of keeping his grip on consciousness.

When he did come to again, it was to blazing lights and the loud, echoing noise of gunshots. For a second, he thought he was back in a warzone, doing some sort of mission for HYDRA, but then the aching pain in his body made itself known, and with it came his memories. Mousy was here, and he wasn't necessarily a terrible guy.

A body thumped next to him, and he turned his head to see a lifeless HYDRA agent staring back at him, dead eyes and slack face filling his vision. Peter shrieked and - rather ungracefully - clambered backwards, not realising until it was too late that his escape route was blocked by another dead body. Great, more fuel for the raging fire that was his nightmares.

He took a moment to survey the carnage that had somehow occurred in the minutes he'd been out. He wasn't sure exactly how much time had passed while he'd been unconscious, but it couldn't have been too long. Peter knew from experience that close-range firefights like this didn't last long. Case in point; the five dead HYDRA agents scattered on the ground, their blood leaking from various bullet wounds and onto the concrete floor. A particularly gruesome head-shot victim was sprawled a bit too close for comfort, and Peter jerked his hand away from the ever-growing pool of blood seeping steadily closer to him.

The fight was still going, with just a single HYDRA agent of the six that had been escorting him and Mousy left standing. It was like one of those Midwestern stand-offs in the old movies that he Clint, Tony and Sam had watched religiously, but with much higher stakes and a lot less cool music and shots to enhance the audience's cinematic experience. Peter had come to the realisation that stuff was a lot less cool in real life. Real life didn't have rocking soundtracks or aesthetically shot views of what was happening, which was kind of a bummer, really. Real life was messy, it was unedited and dirty and it made Peter want to cry at times. But it also made him want to smile and laugh so hard he peed himself, so it couldn't be all that bad.

Mousy glared at the last HYDRA agent - Peter had dubbed him Hawaii, simply because he'd decided he wanted to go there after this whole thing was over, and this man was the last obstacle in his way - and the other man glared right back. Hawaii was severely out-gunned, his little pistol no match for the bazooka-esque thing that Mousy was toting around.

Sometimes, Peter thought real life *was* a movie, because some of the shit that happened in it was far too coincidental to be random. There was no way that Mousy and Hawaii could have taken the shot at the exact same time, no way that the world could have decided now was a nice time to make Peter see everything in slow-motion, no way that the bullet from Hawaii's gun could have smashed into Mousy's chest at the same time the bullet from Mousy's gun could have shot straight through Hawaii's head. There was no way.

Yet here Peter was, watching them both fall to the ground in perfect sync, in slow-motion. All that was missing was the depressing background music, but Peter didn't notice it's absence because he was too busy thinking *what the fuck*.

Mousy hit the ground like a stone, his legs crumpled underneath him like wet cardboard. The scarlet stain spreading underneath him was horrifying in the way it just grew and grew and grew, like a neon sign spelling '*death*' for all the world to see.

Peter didn't want to see.

He'd seen a lot of deaths in his years, far more than the average person. He'd planned death, he'd caused death, he'd watched death. Death was an old friend, but he also knew death could be a bitch

sometimes. Death took away people that didn't deserve to go. Death let monsters live while innocents were slaughtered.

Death was unfair, and should have, realistically at least, taken Peter a long time ago. He was a bad person, he'd done things that would have made the Devil cringe and he'd gotten no retribution for his crimes. Now, a stranger had died for him. A stranger that probably had a family waiting for him at home and a life to go back to. A life that he could no longer live.

The least Peter could do was not let the kid die alone.

Peter dragged himself over to Mousy - suddenly it was hard to think of the nickname he'd given the boy without cringing. He didn't even know the guy's real name - and knelt by his side. The kid's cheeks were pale, eyes wide and glassy as he stared at the hole in his chest, panting heavily.

"Hey, look at me. Look at me, eyes up here," Peter said, waving his fingers in front of the boy's face. His pain was gone now, either pushed back so he could focus on the task at hand, or his body had gone completely numb. Mousy continued to stare at the wound, so Peter put a finger under his chin and lifted it up so the boy could see his face. "There we go, it's alright, kid, it's okay."

Mousy's chin quivered, eyes filling with tears, and Peter felt his own do the same. Damnit, his time with the Avengers had unlocked the empathy that he'd shut away inside himself during his dark, dark days with HYDRA. It had been necessary at the time so that he could do the things he did without drowning in guilt, but he'd been glad to get it back. Now, he was starting to wish he'd never found it.

"Hey now, it's alright, you're gonna be fine." Lies, it was all lies. Peter was sick of the lying, but he continued to spew the comforting bullshit anyway because he'd truly be a monster if he didn't. You don't tell a dying kid that no one knows what comes next. "Hey, listen to me, ok? *Thank you*, you saved my life. You saved it, thank you."

There were footsteps pounding somewhere far behind him but Peter paid them no mind. He didn't know if they were friend or foe, but they were still a while away yet. They had time.

Mousy started gasping, his breaths coming in quick, irregular pants, and Peter knew what was coming. He leaned down to the boy, so that his face filled Mousy's entire field of vision. "Death is but the next great adventure, you'll see," Peter whispered. He could add quoting *Harry Potter* to a dying boy onto the list of things he never thought he'd do. The breaths stopped with a final gasp, and Peter let out a sigh. So much death, and it was all arbitrary in the end. No one would know of the boy that had died in the basement of an evil organisation to save a stranger. No one would know of the ultimate sacrifice made in this very room.

The footsteps behind him got louder, and with them came voices. Peter heard Tony and sighed with relief - so they were friends, after all. That was good, he couldn't deal with any more foes. He rose shakily, stumbling a few steps towards Tony, who'd yet to round the corner, before falling to his knees. He felt so weak, like the blood that was leaving his body was taking his energy with it, his very will to live.

C'mon, dumbass, get up. Leave the carnage behind. Get up.

And so he did. He rose shakily again, stumbling too many times to count, but he made it around the corner, knees knocking and breath coming in harsh pants as he leaned against a wall.

And then he collapsed.

Just as his vision faded to black yet again, he saw a pair of red and gold-clad feet running his way.

Tony .

~~~

*Fuck.*

The kid was out again, lying unmoving on the hard concrete ground. In fact, from this angle, it didn't even look like the kid was breathing-

His stomach dropped, the floor abruptly disappearing from underneath his feet. Adrenaline still coursing through him from the fight, Tony ran to Peter's side and dropped to his knees, hoping, praying that this was just another bout of unconsciousness, that it wasn't - that it wasn't -

"FRIDAY, vitals, right now," he instructed, voice shaking ever so slightly.

*"His pulse is there, boss, but it's faint. You need to hurry."*

A flood of relief washed over him, but it was short-lived. Peter was currently alive, but that would mean nothing if he ended up dying halfway to the quinjet anyway. Letting out an unsteady breath, Tony lifted up the kid and gently passed him over to the AI suit again.

"Be careful with him," he reminded the suit.

"Tony," came Clint's voice through the earpiece. "Tony, are you guys any closer to getting out of there? We've got waves of agents coming at us - like, literally, there's a wave of about a hundred every minute, and Point Break's good, but even his trusty hammer is starting to fail us-"

"Yeah, it's all good, we've got Peter and we're about to head up to you guys," Tony told him. "Just keep Banner angry for a few more minutes, okay? We'll be fast."

"Okay. But you better hurry, we're getting our asses kicked up here."

"Will do."

Tony turned to Wanda and Vision. "You guys hear that?"

Wanda nodded, two small red spheres crackling softly in her hands. "We'd better get a move on."

They made their way back down the corridor at a brisk jog, not wanting to risk going any faster for fear of further aggravating Peter's injuries. Mercifully, they met little resistance from HYDRA on their way back, save for a few stranded agents that they took out easily; either they'd already come face to face with most of the assault force, or the rest of them had already been drawn away to the main fight occurring on the upper levels. It was by some small miracle that they reached these upper levels completely unscathed (well, unless you counted Tony's broken wrist, but when compared to the magnitude and severity of Peter's injuries, a fractured bone was practically laughable), and as soon as they made it to the main area where the team had infiltrated, Tony saw immediately that Clint hadn't been exaggerating.

It was total mayhem. Half of this part had been destroyed; part of the ceiling had collapsed in on itself and piles of rubble littered the ground, which was covered in a sea of unmoving HYDRA agents, unconscious or worse. The Hulk was doing more damage to the building itself than the

agents, though the ones that he did take on were thoroughly wrung out within about five seconds; Thor's hammer was speeding through the place in a blur, taking out agent after agent; Steve, Natasha, Clint and Sam were engaged in a battle with about ten of HYDRA's most elite agents, which didn't appear to be progressing well; meanwhile, Rhodey was hovering above everyone, blasting out the agents that the Hulk and Thor missed. It was a somewhat effective system, Tony had to admit, but they were severely outnumbered, and the longer they stayed, the worse the situation would become.

He had to force himself, once again, not to indulge his desire to drag out the fight himself. Next time. There would be a next time.

But not for Peter if they didn't get him to safety, and fast.

"Tony!" Steve yelled, in between trading punches with one of the Winter Soldiers. "Quinjet's near where we left the suits! You guys get it and fly it over to us, hover it directly under where the others blasted in and we'll jump out and climb in."

Tony nodded, shooting Steve the thumbs-up. "Got it, Cap." He turned to Wanda and Vision, swallowing away the urge to join in the fight. "Maximoff, you need a ride?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "You'd think after two years, you'd know by now that I can fly with my powers, Tony."

"Well, I am known for my short term memory issues," Tony shrugged, before turning to the AI suit, which was still carrying unconscious Peter. "Go easy on the flying, okay? And don't you dare drop him, or I won't hesitate to self-destruct you."

*"Are you threatening an inanimate object, boss?"* FRIDAY questioned.

"Technically, I'm threatening you, seeing as you control it," Tony replied. "But we'll argue that later. For now, it's time to jet."

Tony activated his flight power, Wanda, Vision and the AI suit right behind him, and they flew past the battle and through the significant hole in the cliff face that the team had created using Tony's own missiles upon arriving at the HYDRA base. As soon as they were out, Tony noticed that time had trickled well into the hours of the next day; judging by the sun, it was midday, or perhaps late afternoon. He'd only spent a handful of hours in the torture room with Peter, but it had felt like years.

He could only imagine how much longer it had felt for the kid.

They flew down low to where the quinjet was parked at the base of the mountain and entered the aircraft, Tony removing his helmet as he did so.

"One of you mind searching for some blankets or something?" he asked Wanda and Vision. "I need somewhere for Peter to lie down, and the metal table's just gonna make his injuries even worse."

"Certainly," Vision replied.

While the superbots busied themselves searching for blankets, and Wanda helped the AI suit care for Peter, Tony took control of the quinjet and turned on the engines, giving it a few seconds to warm up before rising the aircraft steadily into the air. He glanced at the dashboard and noticed that the quinjet still had two missiles left - God, the temptation to launch a few of them in the direction of the base's underground rooms was almost overwhelming, especially now that he knew the primary purpose of them - but the rest of the team was still on the upper levels, and he couldn't afford to

risk them getting hurt, as much as he wanted to destroy every last nook and cranny on this godforsaken HYDRA base.

Carefully, Tony directed the quinjet downwards and manoeuvred it so that it was hovering directly below the destroyed exterior of the HYDRA base.

"I'll open the door and help get them in," Vision decided, before exiting the aircraft and flying up to where the Avengers were now abandoning their battlefield, Rhodey providing cover with his repulsors and Thor with his hammer while the rest of the team made a run for it. Vision helped them make the leap onto the quinjet and guided them down into the open hatch, where they came tumbling in one by one, dishevelled and panting and sweating uncontrollably. Finally, only Rhodey and Thor were left; they abruptly ditched the battles they were fighting, turned and flew out of the base, passing smoothly through the hatch and into the quinjet.

"Is that everyone?" Rhodey wheezed, taking off his helmet and staggering to his feet.

"Let's hope so," Sam muttered. "I'd rather not go back in for round two."

"Hey, Vision, mind taking over the wheel?" Tony called. "Gotta go check on Peter."

"Oh, shit yeah, almost forgot about the little squirt," Clint realised. "Where is he? We didn't blast into that shithole for nothing, did we?"

"Thankfully, no," Tony said, as Vision replaced him in the driver's bay. "Kid's just over here."

He directed the rest of the team to the set-up that Wanda and Vision had created, with several blankets draped over the metal table, upon which Peter lay. His eyes were closed, his head lolling limply to the side as blood pumped steadily through the HYDRA jacket Tony had wrapped around his torso, which was now completely soaked.

"Oh, Jesus," Steve muttered, staring down at Peter. "Do you know what they did to him?"

"Parts of it," Tony replied tersely, feeling a flash of white-hot anger as he remembered just what, exactly, he'd witnessed in Peter's torture room. "I saw them waterboard him for at least an hour, and I know they did it on more than one occasion. They also burned him with a poker, and I'm pretty sure they stabbed and whipped him too. Oh, and I heard some HYDRA agents say they tried to brainwash him, as well." Even speaking the words out loud - hearing the injuries listed, one after the other - was almost too much to bear. The nauseated feeling had returned in full force, and Tony was tempted to warn Steve, who was standing beside him, to give him a wide berth.

"Did it work?" Natasha asked, looking at Peter with soft concern in her usually hardened eyes. "The brainwashing?"

"Not from what I could tell," Tony answered, feeling a flicker of pride underneath the anger.

Peter had been strong. He had been really, really fucking strong. Now that they were out of that hellhole, and flying safely away, Tony could fully appreciate this, in a way that he hadn't been able to while trapped with the kid in the torture room. He'd dealt with all of the shit - the torture, the brainwashing, God knew what else - with more dignity than most adults would have been able to conjure up, whilst firing off those feisty one-liners non-stop, the one-liners behind which Tony had inadvertently taught the kid the basics of. If he hadn't been preoccupied trying not to throttle the kid's deranged handler on the spot right then and there, Tony could have taken more time to fully appreciate those sassy lines. The kid had certainly developed his own flair from Tony's style.

"He's lost a lot of blood," Sam noted. "Too much, I'd say. Where's Bruce?"

“He has just undergone his transformation,” came Thor’s voice from across the quinjet. “He’s no longer big and green and monstrous, but small and quite...scrawny.”

“With seven PhDs, don’t forget,” Bruce groaned, from the floor of the quinjet.

Thor seemed to disregard this, instead turning to face the other Avengers. “You mortals really aren’t a muscular lot, are you?”

“When compared to Norse gods, no, I guess we aren’t,” Rhodey drawled, rolling his eyes.

“Unless of course you drink a magic potion like Rogers,” Tony added, unable to help himself. Steve shot him a glare, but didn’t retaliate, probably because Tony’s expression had darkened considerably as he remembered the issue at hand. “But anyway, we’re getting sidetracked and wasting valuable time. Bruce, we need you over here, Peter’s in bad shape.”

Looking incredibly disheveled and clumsy, and missing his shirt, Bruce stumbled over to Peter’s table and stared down at him. Tony could practically see Bruce’s doctor mode emerging; his expression turned clinical and he ran his eyes over Peter’s body thoroughly, assessing all the damage. After a moment of silence, he carefully unpeeled Tony’s HYDRA jacket from Peter’s torso, revealing the extensive number of burns, cuts and gashes across his torso.

Tony winced at the sight, anger flaring in his stomach again. He’d seen it before, of course, but this did nothing to detract from his need to suddenly punch through several walls. Immediately.

“It’s bad, Tony,” Bruce said in a low voice, the team listening to every word. “He’s lost too much blood, I’m going to need to get him a blood transplant as soon as we get home, and stitch him up - until then, all we can really do is hook him up to an IV, and dress and bandage his wounds. The burns will need treating, as well, to prevent infection - I’ve got some things for burns in the Med Bay, but these ones are pretty severe. He’ll probably be left with scars. The bruises on his face are extensive, so I’d guess he’s got some pretty bad head trauma - a decent concussion, as well. Do you know of any other injuries he might have?”

“Yeah,” Tony said, stomach churning uncomfortably and blood boiling furiously. “He was whipped on his back, he’s got some bad lash marks there - and I know he was waterboarded, pretty severely too-”

“Oh, no,” Bruce said, his face paling. “How long for?”

“An hour, at least, and on two occasions,” Tony said quickly, his stomach dropping at the expression on Bruce’s face. “Why, Bruce, what’s up?”

“It’s just - he could have some excess water leftover in his lungs, which could lead to secondary drowning,” Bruce said quietly, eyes concerned. “I can’t treat it here - once we’re back at the Tower, I can extract the fluid, but until then, we need to keep his head tilted like this-” He placed a hand on Peter’s jaw and manoeuvred his mouth so that it was pointing downwards, hanging down - “to try and keep his airway as clear as possible. For now, that’s about all we can do.”

Tony didn’t like that. In fact, *didn’t like* was an understatement - he hated it. Hated their helplessness, hated that they couldn’t heal all Peter’s injuries right then and there, hated the fact that they’d even let Peter’s injuries reach this extent in the first place, and maybe if he’d just been a little bit fucking faster, the kid wouldn’t be lying there with a bunch of water in his lungs, practically bleeding himself dry with parts of his skin almost charred black. Pepper’s words of comfort about his not being to blame had all but left him, impossible to recall as he stared down at the mess of his kid, the mess that HYDRA had made, but a mess that could have been prevented

entirely if Tony had acted like the genius he was so famous for supposedly being. They might have gotten the kid out eventually, but how much damage had been inflicted before they had? The answer was there - sprawled out on the table in front of them, an unconscious, bleeding boy, skinny and pale, skin marred with all sorts of wounds. But what Tony was most afraid of, and what he'd learned from personal experience, was that the worst damage was the invisible kind. The things you couldn't see. Mental damage. And after everything Peter had endured at HYDRA's hands, was this going to be it? Had he reached his limit on torture? After using up every last scrap of strength back in that base, to stay strong for Tony, had he drained his supply?

Had Peter reached his breaking point?

It was a thought that scared Tony to no end, made worse by the fact that he had no way of truly knowing. Not yet, at least. Only time would tell.

But as he stared down into Peter's mangled face, watching as Bruce began dressing and bandaging his bleeding wounds, Tony knew one thing.

Nothing like this was ever going to happen to his kid again.

He would make sure of it.

No matter how many HYDRA scumbags he had to blast to smithereens along the way.

## Chapter End Notes

Wow we really have a problem with this angst stuff don't we. If you thought you were finally going to get a chapter without some dark, juicy angst going on, sorry to let you down for the thousandth time.

Also quick apology for killing off Mousy, we know he was a crowd favourite so of course it made perfectly logical sense that he had to die. Actually, if I'm being honest, Mousy's death was my co-writer's idea, so go blame her if you really want to start a fight (except don't, because I agreed to it so I guess that makes me just as evil). She did also come up with the genius pun for our chapter name, though, which totally makes up for it. (There, I gave you credit PS\_NoThanks).

Anyway, hope you enjoyed! If you liked it, make sure to leave kudos or comment! More will be coming soon, and just think, when all the fluff does finally arrive (if it ever does, who knows, it might never come) - but if it does, it'll taste so much sweeter after all the heavy angst rollercoaster we've put you guys through...

Thanks for reading, as always! We appreciate every single one of you guys :)



# Floating And Falling

## Chapter Notes

Hello ladies and gentlemen we are back with another chapter.

This one has some more fluff to counteract all the whump of last chapter but, well...

it's us. Of course there's also angst, maybe even another nice cliffhanger for ya'll.

Please excuse us for any medical inaccuracies, though don't be afraid to point them out so we can fix them :)

Anyway, hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony had thought, during his flight to the HYDRA base in New Mexico, that it had been the longest journey of his life.

He had been, quite frankly, entirely wrong.

Nothing could compare to this. The quinjet ride only lasted a few hours, but those few hours seemed to dredge on so slowly that Tony wasn't altogether sure he hadn't already lived the remainder of his life, died, and descended into the depths of hell by the time they finally, finally arrived at the Avengers Tower. They deposited the quinjet in the underground hangar and hurried into the Tower, Peter cradled in Tony's arms and still thoroughly unconscious.

"Nat, make a call to Helen, see how far away she is," Bruce instructed, as the Avengers hurried into the elevator and re-emerged on the level of the Med Bay. They had already called Helen Cho on the quinjet, asking her to come to the Tower as soon as possible, and to bring the Regenerative Cradle, to help heal Peter's wounds.

"On it," said Nat.

As soon as they were in the Med Bay, things kicked into chaotic action. Steve retrieved one of the transportable beds-on-wheels and brought it out to the main corridor, and Peter was carefully laid onto it. Natasha returned, telling them that Helen was still on her way and would make it to the Tower in about ten minutes.

"We can't wait that long," Tony growled. "Look at him, Bruce, he's bleeding to death-"

"I can make a start," Bruce cut in. "Heal his bleeding wounds, or as many as I can get through in ten minutes, at least. It'll just be -" He hesitated, running a hand through his hair anxiously, then continued, "He'll be more at risk for a while, with only me working. When Helen arrives, we should be able to speed up the process, but with only one-"

"Just do what you can, Bruce," Steve interjected calmly.

But Tony wasn't having it. Although Bruce hadn't explicitly stated it, and although Tony sure as hell wasn't a medical expert, he wasn't completely ignorant, either, and he knew a life-threatening wound when he saw one. It was obvious - from the unusually pale grey colour of Bruce's face, to the tension in his stance - that until Helen arrived, he would be hard pushed to keep Peter alive.

“Let me help,” he said suddenly. “I can help you, I wanna be in there with him.”

But Bruce was already shaking his head. “Tony, do you know how to perform a blood transfusion? Do you know how to stitch a wound? There’s nothing you can do in there for me, you’re already stressed enough as it is-”

“Just let me help you,” Tony insisted, on the verge of begging again. “I can, I dunno, get stuff for you, I won’t do any of the serious stuff, but admit it, Bruce, you need help. I *want* to help.”

He held his breath for a few seconds, watching as Bruce considered his words, but before the man could speak, Steve spoke up. And much to Tony’s utter shock, it wasn’t in disagreement of something he’d said.

“I think Tony’s right, Bruce,” he said. “Just until Helen comes, at least, let a few of us go in there and help you. We can just grab things for you, that kind of thing. Look at all the injuries Peter’s got - there’s no way you can deal with all of those on your own, even if it is only for a handful of minutes.”

Bruce hesitated, wringing out his hands in obvious unease as he processed this.

“Okay,” he finally agreed reluctantly. “Okay, we can give it a try.”

Relief washed over Tony, and the tension unknotted in his shoulders, just a little.

“Alright. Sam, Tony and I will give you a hand in there,” Steve decided, Rhodey, go wait for Helen, and when she comes, show her into the Med Bay. Natasha, go tell Bucky and Pepper what’s happening. The rest of you, just wait here in case we need some extra hands on deck.”

Tony’s heart hammered furiously against his chest as he wheeled Peter’s bed into the main operating room of the Med Bay, Steve, Sam and Bruce alongside him. He felt like tearing out several pieces of his hair at how *slowly* everything seemed to be progressing - first, Bruce insisted that Peter was hooked up to an IV, so that the blood transfusion could begin as soon as possible; he also connected Peter to a machine that kept track of his pulse, beeping steadily along with the faint, but tangible, beat of Peter’s heart.

That beeping was music to Tony’s ears.

And then there was the matter of *retrieving* the blood - Bruce kept regular stocks in the Med Bay’s storage room in case of emergency procedures; the blood was stored in a refrigerator and replenished every 42 days.

“Make sure to get red blood cells only, the ones in the fridge that’s kept at six degrees Celsius,” Bruce told them. “That’s what you need for these kind of injuries.”

Tony and Steve hurried to retrieve the required amount for Peter, while Sam helped Bruce gather the medical equipment needed to stitch Peter’s wounds. Once they had returned with the red blood cells, Tony handed them to Bruce expecting him to hook Peter up immediately.

“No, we’ve got to wait,” Bruce explained. “We can’t transfuse the blood yet-”

“*What?*” Tony practically snarled - Peter was still unconscious on the operating table, blood slowly pumping through Bruce’s bandages, and if one more minute passed without the kid’s blood supply being replenished, Tony was going to lose it. “What was the point of us getting it, then?”

“So that it’s right here ready for us to use,” Bruce said calmly, then, upon catching sight of Tony’s

furious expression, added, “ *when we’re ready for it*. You can’t transfuse blood while Peter’s still got open wounds. We need to heal them first, and I’ve already examined some of them, and it looks like a few are getting infected-”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Tony burst out. “We have to deal with *infection*, now, too?”

He felt like his heart was going to explode outwards. The urge to just *do something* - to run over to Peter, transfuse his blood, magically make the infected wounds go away - was overwhelming. Tony didn’t care that he was far from qualified; if Bruce wasn’t one of his best friends and someone that he trusted deeply, he probably would have run the man aside and tried to operate on the kid himself.

*Beep, beep, beep*, went the heart monitor, and it was that, if nothing else, that prevented Tony from losing it completely.

*Deep breaths. Stay calm. He’s still alive. He’s not...not....*

“It hasn’t reached his bloodstream yet, though,” Bruce quickly assured him, bringing Tony back to reality. “I’ll apply some antiseptic and give him some antibiotics a bit later. It just means stitching the wounds might take slightly longer.”

Tony nodded, swallowing past the growing lump of anxiety in his throat. “Alright. Do what you have to do. Just - try to hurry, please.”

*Before I go completely insane*, was left unsaid. They were all fully aware of Peter’s critical condition, and Tony’s simultaneously declining cool.

There wasn’t anything else they could help with as Bruce started working away at Peter’s wounds, but as seconds trickled into minutes, Tony’s panic only continued to grow. Was he imagining the increasing gap between each *beep* of the heart monitor, or was Peter’s pulse growing steadily weaker? Was he seeing things, or was the rise and fall of the kid’s chest becoming more sporadic with each passing second? Helen still hadn’t arrived, and he was sure it had been well over ten minutes since Natasha had contacted her.

“Let’s go find Nat,” Steve suggested, who had sensed Tony’s growing restlessness. “We can find out where Helen is.”

“I’m not leaving,” Tony returned resolutely, staring down at Peter’s unconscious face. What he wouldn’t give to see those eyelids flutter open groggily, to see Peter’s endearingly chocolate-coloured eyes open, big and wide and *alive*-

“Tony, you can’t do anything for him here,” Sam pointed out. “It’s better if we leave Bruce alone. Plus, we need Helen. She’s bringing the Cradle, and once we hook Peter up to that, this whole thing will go a lot faster.”

Tony hesitated, still staring down at Peter’s firmly shut eyes, still praying that somehow, miraculously, they would open. But they remained tightly closed, and despite his overwhelming need to stay by the kid’s side at *all times*, the logical part of his brain (or what was left of it, by this point) told him that Sam and Steve were right.

“Okay,” he finally agreed, feeling as though he had just accepted Peter’s death sentence or something. A horrible, sick feeling of foreboding rose up in his throat, but he allowed himself to be ushered out of the room, Sam and Steve on either side of him.

As soon as they were out in the main corridor, they were met by Rhodey, looking slightly frantic.

“Oh, thank God,” he said. “Any of you seen Nat? I’ve been waiting for Helen to show, but no sign of her yet - I was going to get Nat to contact her again-”

The ball of panic bubbling in Tony’s throat threatened to explode outwards completely.

“What?” he said, heart sinking to somewhere near his feet. “But we need her - Peter’s wounds are infected, some of them at least, and Bruce is trying to deal with it but - well - I don’t know how much longer-”

He broke off, unable to finish the sentence. Hearing the words spoken aloud would be too much; Tony could barely deal with them echoing around hauntingly in the dark recesses of his brain.

“Come on, Natasha went to find Pepper and Bucky, remember?” Steve pointed out. “Let’s head downstairs and Tony can call her instead.”

They hurried into the elevator, Tony pulling out his Stark Phone and punching in Helen’s number as he went. For several painful, tantalising seconds, all that could be heard was the mechanical ringing of the phone.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

“Hello, this is Helen speaking, how can I-”

“Helen!” The cry of relief had escaped Tony’s lips before he could stop himself, and he quickly cleared his throat and tried again.

“Yes, uh, Helen,” he rushed to say. “It’s me. Tony. Tony Stark.” Ignoring the fact that the clarification of his last name had definitely *not* been necessary, and only further proof that he really was losing his goddamn mind, Tony plunged on. “Look, we’ve got Peter down in the Med Bay and we’re just wondering-”

“How long I’m going to be? I’m so sorry, Tony, I was just about to call you myself. Manhattan traffic is a nightmare and I’ve been sitting in a car jam for the last fifteen minutes, but I’ve finally started gaining some ground. I should be there in five.” She paused for a moment, and Tony was about to wrap up the call when she continued, “Anything I should know about his condition, apart from what you told me earlier?”

“Yeah,” Tony said, his stomach churning again. “Bruce has done a closer inspection of the injuries, and some of them are infected - he’s applied some antiseptic, but it’s slowing the healing process down-”

“Is the infection in the bloodstream?” Helen asked coolly, her voice one of trained professionalism.

“No - not yet, I don’t think-”

“Then it’s not life-threatening. Once we apply the Cradle’s regenerative tissue to Peter, the infection should clear up on its own, combined with perhaps a healthy dose of antibiotics. And

what about the blood loss?"

Tony swallowed, feeling another rush of barely-controllable panic at Helen's words. "Bruce has started stitching up what he can, but some of the wounds are - sort of - messy." *That's putting it fucking lightly.* "He's lost a lot of blood, but we can't transfuse yet, and it's pretty serious..." He trailed off, completely at a loss for what to say, because Peter was *dying* and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it, and he hated this feeling, this *helplessness* -

"Okay. Listen, Tony, I'm about to arrive at the Tower, would you mind coming down and helping me bring the Cradle in?" How Helen's voice was able to stay so calm, so cool and *collected*, in this time of complete and utter panic, was a mystery to Tony. He personally was on the verge of slamming his own head through a wall.

"Yeah, sure," he said out loud, wondering if the slight quaver in his voice betrayed the internal tornado of panic that was raging inside of him.

"Thank you," Helen replied. "And Tony?"

"Yeah?"

"Just - try to stay calm, okay? I know it feels like the world is about to end right now, but everything will go much more smoothly if you just keep a clear head."

Tony felt it would be more than a little insensitive to point out that as of right now, he could just as easily embark on a spontaneous trip to Mars. In another circumstance, one that wasn't quite so terrifying, he might have even laughed at himself; he still vividly remembered the little speech he'd given to Steve, whilst trying to convince him to let Tony infiltrate HYDRA disguised as one of the Winter Soldiers, and the dark irony of those words were almost haunting now.

*Jesus Rogers, how do you think I would have survived the last eight godforsaken years if I didn't know how to turn off my emotions? Emotional incapacitation is literally my brand name.*

And here he was, barely twenty-four hours later, experiencing the most extreme bout of fully-intact, non-incapacitated emotions he'd ever had to deal with in his life. There was only one other moment in his life that had rendered him so entirely un-clear-headed, and that had been the death of his parents. The fact that Peter, a boy who he'd met on the streets barely two months ago, could evoke a similar level of emotional turmoil from him, was quite frankly, slightly terrifying.

He couldn't deny it.

He cared way, way, way too much about this kid.

*Jesus Pete, what are you doing to me?*

"Tony."

He was pulled sharply back to reality by the sound of Steve's voice. Shaking away his far-from-clear-headed thoughts, Tony glanced back up to see that Steve, Sam and Rhodey were all staring at him, wearing identical expressions of concern. Tony looked down at the phone in his hand and saw that the call with Helen was still running. He quickly raised it back to his ear.

"Thanks for everything, Helen. We'll meet you at the Tower lobby in two minutes."

"Is everything okay?" Rhodey asked him, as he pocketed the phone.

Tony stared at him for a moment, the question pulsing through his head and reverberating around his skull.

*No, everything is not okay, Rhodey, haven't you noticed? This is the least okay that anything has ever been, and Peter is literally bleeding himself dry in the Med Bay and Helen's only just arrived and I don't know if she's even going to make it in time and even if she does maybe the Cradle won't work on Peter and there's no way Bruce can stitch all his wounds in time if it doesn't, even with Helen's help, and I'm terrified because for whatever fucked-up reason, I decided to get myself emotionally invested in this kid and I can't lose him, not now, not when we just got him back-*

"Let's go," Tony said.

The elevator doors opened out into the lobby, and they hurried through them, all but sprinting out the front doors and onto the sidewalk. Parked right next to the Tower was Helen's car, and Tony could have kissed her when he saw the woman herself, dragging the Regenerative Cradle unceremoniously out of the boot.

"Would you mind giving me a hand?" she called.

Together, they hauled the Cradle into the Tower and returned to the elevator, pressing the button that would take them to the Med Bay. The doors opened, and they hurried down the corridor, Tony's breath quickening with every step they took towards the operating room-  
"Tony!"

Tony glanced up and saw Natasha sprinting towards them, looking uncharacteristically frazzled as she ran from the direction of Peter's room. She came to a stop in front of them, and Tony saw that her face was covered in a sheen of sweat.

"You need to get in there," she said. "Right now."

She sounded *terrified*.

She sounded completely and utterly terrified, and Tony's panic, which had been eating away at his insides and building up steadily in his throat, now rose to breaking point, because Natasha Romanov always kept her cool, and she was never, ever terrified, and that could only mean one thing-

"Go!" she yelled, all but shoving them forwards, and they were sprinting now, all four of them, and as they drew closer to Peter's room Tony strained his ears, listening for the sound of the heart monitor, but he couldn't hear it, *he couldn't hear the beeping*, and they reached Peter's room and the rest of the Avengers were crowded around a glass window, looking in on the scene, and they all looked just as terrified as Natasha-

Tony slammed the door open, barely breathing, heart screaming for release, just about ready to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the kid himself-

*Beep, beep. Beep, beep.*

His heart was still beating. It was still beating, but Tony had never heard such a faint, slow pulse, and he could tell from Bruce's expression that Peter had lost far too much blood...that he was close to dying...

*Beep, beep.*

They set the Cradle down, and Tony stood up, fully prepared to help in whatever way possible, but

Steve stopped him.

*Beep, beep.*

“Tony, come on, we’ve gotta leave them to it, we can’t help them.”

“Not happening,” Tony growled. “Bruce, come on, let me stay, I need to stay-”

*Beep, beep.*

But Bruce didn’t respond, and Tony doubted that the man had even registered his voice - he was huddled next to the Cradle with Helen, preparing the tissue that would heal Peter’s wounds....

*Beep, beep.*

“Tony, we’re only going to cause a distraction if we stay,” Rhodey said quietly, his voice trembling slightly.

*Beep, beep.*

“He’s right,” Steve agreed. “Let’s go - we can watch from outside with the team-”

*Beep, beep.*

“No, I can’t, you don’t get it, Rogers, I can’t,” Tony said, his voice breaking, and he didn’t care that he sounded desperate, didn’t care that he was fucking pleading, didn’t care that he couldn’t breathe. All he cared about was the kid on the table, the kid that had gotten caught in the mess Tony had made, the kid whose life had already been fucked over so many times, the kid that he was pretty sure he *loved*-

And then the beeping stopped.

~~~

When Peter first moved into the Tower, Tony had introduced him to the wonders of the internet. He had, of course, used it before during his HYDRA days, but it had been purely for research purposes, and his activities had been monitored closely by his handler, lest he stumble upon something he shouldn’t.

There had also been that one time he’d hacked into the SHIELD database from a library computer while he was living on the streets in order to dig up dirt on the Avengers, but no one needed to know about that. He had a feeling none of the team would be very impressed with him if he shared that little tidbit of information.

Now, though, with his newfound freedom, he was privy to all the wondrous things that the internet could provide. He had not known about all the sites created purely for entertainment, or for sharing ideas. These days, he could consider himself well educated, thanks to a few quick courses run by Wanda and Vision (Steve had also taken part in them, determined to fulfill his self-set goal of understanding the modern world. Peter had been told not to mention the fact that the man had quit just two lessons in because he didn’t understand how YouTube worked and it had frustrated so much that he’d snapped the StarkPad that Tony had lent him in half. Peter had almost immediately

disobeyed the request, and the hysterical laughter that the story had drawn out of the rest of the team was totally worth the withering look from Steve).

Wanda had introduced him to Instagram, where Peter had made the mistake of replying to the unknown man that had texted him and promised him a 'good time :)'. The picture he'd received in response was... not one he really wanted to remember. It was far, far away in the back of his mind, locked up in a safe guarded by guard dogs - he really didn't want to reflect upon it any time soon. Peter had also explored Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr; the latter has supplied him with some very interesting threads that he'd spent hours scrolling through in the early hours of the morning, particularly when he experienced a bout of insomnia (usually because he was dreading the nightmares he would inevitably experience upon giving in to his subconscious).

Pinterest was another biggie. It was his go-to when he was bored, and his account had over one hundred thousand unique monthly viewers - he had a whole board dedicated to the Avengers, and yet another one set aside entirely for memes. It was very organised, and Sam had gone into full-out therapist mode when he saw it. Apparently Peter's need to control certain things was a product of his childhood, a time in his life that had been dominated by uncertainty and fluctuating routines. Peter had elected to ignore him - being organised wasn't a *crime* - and carried on with his board-making and pin-sorting.

His introduction to the world of social media platforms had caused him to spend many a night staying up until two in the morning so that he could do the randomest shit. Apparently, it was part of being a teenager in today's world, and Peter loved every second of it. Occasionally though, he'd stumble across a post or video that absolutely blew his mind, and left him quaking in the corner of his ceiling (it was where he went when he was feeling most unsettled. Maybe it was his buried spider-like instincts? Who knew, because it certainly wasn't Peter) while he tried to process the world-shattering facts that had been revealed to him.

Like that time he had watched a seven minute video detailing thirteen reasons as to why and how the moon landing was faked. He had never felt more betrayed in his life (and that was coming from the guy that had been left in the glaciers of Greenland for three consecutive days because he'd been deemed an unnecessary tool during a mission. HYDRA had only returned for him once they were sure they weren't risking anything by coming back). Was it possible the US Government had lied to them all this time? He wasn't fully decided yet, but the man in the video had made some very good points.

But the one thing that had really fucked him up was a post from the account Showerthoughts - he could not yet tell if he loved them or hated them, it was an opinion that varied from moment to moment. The post had read 'you've never seen your own face, only reflections and pictures of it'. He wasn't sure why that revelation shocked him so much, but Peter had needed to watch an hour-long vine compilation to get his mental state back on solid ground after that, but he'd accepted it as annoyingly true.

So now, after having accepted the fact that he'd never be able to truly know what his appearance looked like, he was kind of put out by the fact that he was now seeing his own body below him. And confused. Really, *really* confused.

From what he could tell, he was floating above himself, which was worrying enough on its own, but the flatlining heart monitor next to him was also a cause for concern. Was he dead? Or... almost dead, at least?

He desperately wanted to make some sort of depressing joke, or a sarcastic comment. It was how he, as a proud Gen Z, dealt with really bad situations, but he must have used them all up during his

time in captivity, because he had *nothing* .

He also had no clue how he'd gotten from the HYDRA base to what he assumed was the Tower (if the sleek medical equipment and familiar, modern interior design were anything to go by). All he had to go on were vague flashes of agony racing through his body and panicked voices around him.

He didn't know anything about the situation he found himself in and that was really starting to scare him - maybe Sam had been right about his pathological need to control things? - but he pushed that terror aside and slowed his racing thoughts. He needed to think things through logically. It was something HYDRA had trained to do from as early as he could remember, and it was with almost no effort that he slipped back behind the calm mask that the guise of Asset offered him.

First, he took stock of the situation and concluded that he was, in fact, dead, or nearly there anyway. It was like he was in some weird half-life, where no one could see him (obviously, otherwise he'd probably be getting some odd looks), and he was balancing on the edge of a cliff. If he fell off, that'd be it, he'd be gone. Peter really didn't want to fall off, but it felt like something was pushing him in that direction.

He'd read about the people who had been declared legally dead, only to come back to life spouting stories of bright lights and out of body experiences. Well, there weren't any bright lights, but he was pretty sure the whole thing that was happening right now qualified as an out of body experience, which brought him to his second task; figuring out what, exactly, was going on with his body. It couldn't be normal, that was for sure.

Peter tried to look at the body he was inhabiting at the moment - this whole thing was like a really confusing puzzle that had half its pieces missing, which he had to solve blindfolded - but found he couldn't. As he pushed away the alarming connotations that that revelation presented, he decided that he was currently just an invisible entity, viewing his last moments on earth from above. That was a reasonable explanation and one that he could deal with, right?

Wrong . He could not deal. Even though he didn't have a body right now, not technically, he was really freaking out, and the fact that he couldn't feel the effects that his freak-outs usually had on his body was making him panic even more. While he hated the toll that anxiety took on his body - a too-fast heartbeat that made him feel like he was a ticking bomb, seconds away from exploding, and the nauseating swell of worry clawing its way up to his throat through his stomach - he decided that he hated *knowing* he was anxious and then not feeling the side effects way more. It just felt... *wrong* .

He also really, really did not want to go. He'd had close brushes with death before, but this was by far the closest he'd ever gotten to the real thing. To be honest, he didn't think this really counted as a 'brush with death' anymore. It was more like death had come along and hugged him so tight that it had squeezed the life out of him itself. How ironic that the very organisation that had made him, built him to be who he was today, would also be his downfall.

As he looked down at his body, though, Peter decided he should probably start accepting the fact that he would *have* to go, whether he liked it or not. The situation wasn't looking great for him - his body was *wrecked* , heavily bleeding cuts and ashen skin painted with purple and blue bruises. No wonder Tony had been so scared when he first saw him - he looked like a Picasso painting that had gone through the shredder.

There was a pretty Asian lady dressed in doctor's clothes standing over his body and talking hurriedly with Bruce in murmurs low enough that Peter couldn't pick up what they were saying,

which was surprising given his enhanced hearing. Maybe his senses were fading out, starting the slow descent leading to the complete and utter *nothingness* that would signify his death... and he needed to avoid those thoughts - they were way too morbid for his liking, and there was no way his last thought was going to be anything but a vine reference.

He had to have hope, he was so close to safety, so close to making it out of the woods - it was like he could see the metaphorical sunlight through the metaphorical trees. Was a metaphor still a metaphor if you said metaphorical before it? His basic english lessons at HYDRA hadn't covered that.

And he was getting distracted. Again. Even when his life was *literally* hanging in the balance, he could not keep his focus.

The Doctor-Lady was not someone he'd seen before, but the fact that Bruce seemed to trust her would have to be enough to calm the voices in his mind shouting at him - *do not trust her, she's HYDRA, she'll take you away* . Normally, he wouldn't let an unknown person anywhere near him, but he didn't really have a choice, and all the signs (apart from his uncontrollable mind) pointed towards this woman being here to help, not damage.

The terrified crease in Bruce's forehead was enough to increase Peter's panic tenfold, and the rushed quality to the Doctor-Lady's movements as she scanned the room for something was not exactly improving his state of mind either. He had no clue how long his heart had been on strike for - there was no sense of time in the weird limbo-like place he was stuck in - but he knew the longer he remained 'dead', the more his chances of coming back from it decreased.

His attention was jerked away from the two doctors at the sound of someone screaming his name. It was raw, terrified, and the suddenness of it almost shocked Peter into an early grave... okay, he'd have to admit that that was *really* bad timing, but dark humour and ill-timed puns were his jam.

He turned towards the sound and was met with the sight of Tony, face tomato red as he roared, pulling at the restraining arms around his chest. The arms belonged to Steve, and the man seemed to be trying to calm Tony, even as his own face paled and his horror-filled eyes fixed on Peter's... corpse? He didn't know the correct term for his dead-but-not-really body.

Steve wasn't really succeeding in his mission to soothe Tony, because the other man was still bucking against his hold, screaming the entire time. Peter could have sworn he saw tears glistening in Tony's eyes, but it must have been a trick of the light because Iron Man didn't cry, and the one thing that did make him cry would certainly not be the death of a random assassin-turned-homeless-kid-turned... well, he didn't really know what he was now, but he wasn't in a great position to ponder his existence when it was about to be snuffed out altogether. Though one might say that now would be the perfect time to think about this kind of thing, what with the whole 'your-life-flashes-before-your-eyes' saying.

It didn't really matter if Tony was crying or not, however, because the man was certainly in distress either way. The billionaire's nails scrabbled against Steve's arms, leaving long red welts that healed over seconds after they'd been made, but the super soldier barely seemed to notice.

It was a sign of how anguished Tony was that he didn't stop his actions immediately. While he and Steve sometimes rubbed each other the wrong way, they were on the same side at the end of the day, and Tony would most likely never do something to purposefully hurt the other man.

It shocked Peter, but Steve seemed to be struggling to keep a hold of Tony's squirming body. Maybe the man's own disbelief and grief was affecting his performance, but it took Rhodey's intervention for the two men to finally drag Tony out of the room, the grieving billionaire wailing all the way.

Peter realised there was a huge, glass viewing window embedded in the wall, and everyone was crowded around it, their pale faces only a few shades darker than the stark white walls of the operating room. Great. His kind-of-family was going to witness his death. Shit had really hit the fan this week.

Sam and Clint were standing shoulder to shoulder, arms tensed and jaws clenched. Clint kept sniffing, and it was a testament to just how dire the situation was when no one teased him for it. Thor was standing right next to them, wringing the handle of his hammer with tight fists, and looking like he wanted to snap the thing in half. Peter really hoped Thor didn't break his beloved hammer because of him.

Wanda was gripping Vision's hand tightly, the other hand working on building a ball of bright, red magic in the air. Peter knew that was how she dealt with stress, and the alarming size of the ball spoke of the worry she felt. The normally stoic android beside her also seemed to be at least somewhat upset, because he was gripping Wanda's hand just as tight as she was his, and his usually calm face was pinched in concern.

Natasha stood back from the main group, arms folded across her chest and head bowed. She looked up quickly, as if to check Peter's body was still there, and he caught a glimpse of the fresh tear tracks streaking her face - he was sure it wasn't a trick of the light this time. Shit, he'd made the Black Widow cry. If he came back from this, he'd have to apologise.

Pepper and Bucky were also there, and Peter was glad to see that they were alright after the HYDRA break-in. He'd been so scared that they had been killed, yet here they were, alive, healthy and happy. Okay, so maybe they weren't exactly *happy*; Bucky was standing next to Natasha, his stance mirroring hers, except his eyes were fixed on Peter's body instead of the ground. There were no tears, but his face was pale, and he seemed to be working his jaw back and forth. Peter wanted to tell him to stop because it would ruin his great teeth, and then he'd have to get braces and no one would take the Winter Soldier seriously if he had braces. Also braces were expensive. It was just not something that Peter wanted to happen.

Pepper, however, had no such qualms about showing her tears. They were pouring down her face, and the heartbroken expression on her face made Peter's own heart shake. The woman was dividing her attention between Peter's body and Tony. It looked like she was trying to help calm the man down while Rhodey and Steve worked to restrain him, but her frequent, worried glances towards Peter were undermining her efforts, as they just made Tony more frantic.

While seeing everyone in varying stages of despair was depressing, it also filled him with happiness, in a weird way. It proved, once and for all, with unshakeable finality, that they really, truly cared for him. He was not around to crave reassurance or attention and yet they still showed it. None of them had left. None of them had decided they had better things to do than watch a nobody die on an operating table. They were *here*, and Peter was glad. If he was really going to die, at least he could do it with his family around him.

As soon as Steve and Rhodey let go of Tony, the man was at the window, shoving through the crowd of Avenger's and pressing up against the glass, his nose almost touching it and his breath fogging up the surface. His hands were clasped in front of him, as if in prayer, and he was

muttering, “please, please, don’t go, Pete. *Please* ,” under his breath. The undiluted pain in the man’s voice made Peter’s heart shatter. This would kill Tony, if he died. He had no idea why the man had become just as attached to Peter as Peter was to him, but if he made it out of this alive, he’d relish it and become fifty shades of clingy. There was no way he was going to waste any opportunity that sprang up. He’d try to make it out of this, for Tony.

I’ll try, Tony. I swear, I’ll try.

And then someone shouted, “clear!” and Peter’s attention was jerked away from the grieving man and back towards his own body. The Doctor-Lady was holding the pads of a defibrillator, and they were mere inches away from his chest.

Oh, shit. This is going to hurt. I just hope it’s worth it , Peter thought, right before his world exploded in a flash of white hot pain.

Oh, this better be worth it.

~~~

*Beep, beep.*

*Beep, beep.*

*Beep, beep.*

The beeping was back, and Tony didn’t think he’d ever heard a more glorious sound in his life.

Around him, there was movement. The Avengers, practically crying with relief; Steve, still hovering nearby in case he had to hold him back again; Bruce, in the room, putting the defibrillator away; Helen, activating the Cradle that would heal Peter’s wounds with newly-generated tissue. Tony didn’t care about any of it.

He had eyes only for the kid lying on the table. Unconscious, yes. As pale as death itself, yes. Broken and burnt and bruised and bleeding, yes, yes, yes, yes.

But alive.

*Alive.*

And for now, that was enough.

Steve had backed away from him now, apparently sensing that Tony no longer had the desire to hurl himself through the window, smashing right through the glass just to be at Peter’s side. Later, Tony would probably yell at him, and hit him with a healthy dose of Captain America insults to keep the guy’s ego in check (that super strength was frustratingly unfightable, and Tony didn’t like being overpowered). But he didn’t have the energy for it right now. He was completely and utterly drained.

With the Cradle fully functional, they healed Peter’s bleeding injuries in a matter of minutes, and the panic constricting Tony’s chest slowly de-escalated as he watched wound after wound disappear. Seconds after the last cut had dissipated into nothing, Bruce attached the red blood cells

to Peter's IV, and Tony let himself breathe again as the kid finally got the transfusion that he so desperately needed.

The rest of the healing process was far less urgent. Helen and Bruce extracted the excess water from Peter's lungs; they healed his burns and whip lashes with more regenerative tissue from the Cradle; they set his broken bones and plastered them and applied special cream to the countless bruises on his face. The team stayed outside the window the whole time, watching the entire process. Nobody spoke much, and for this Tony was glad. He didn't think he was capable of speech. He wasn't capable of anything. All he could do was watch Peter, his mind a numb, empty space of exhaustion.

At some point, Bruce briefly abandoned Peter's side, who was now in a stable condition, to tend to Tony's broken wrist. If he was being completely honest, Tony had all but forgotten about the minor injury, so laughably small and insignificant when compared to the extent of Peter's wounds. He barely felt a thing when Bruce examined the broken bone, and didn't even register the man covering his wrist in plaster; Tony's eyes remained fixed on Peter, scared that if he turned away for even a second, that glorious beeping of the heart monitor would stop again. And he knew he couldn't handle something like that a second time - he'd barely made it through the first with his sanity still at least somewhat intact.

Tony had seen many breathtakingly beautiful sights in his life - being a billionaire with a whole load of leftover cash to splurge on extravagant holidays to a variety of exotic destinations around the world had rendered him more than cultured in the *picturesque* department - but nothing, absolutely nothing, could compare to the sight of seeing Peter's chest *move*. It rose and fell, evenly and continuously, and it didn't stop again. Moving. Rising. Falling. Alive.

They had done it. They had actually done it.

The kid was *alive*.

Tony turned to Pepper, who had faithfully stayed by his side during the remainder of the healing process, her eyes flicking intermittently between Peter's unconscious body and Tony himself. Tony knew that she had undoubtedly witnessed his colossal freak-out earlier, and also knew that he had several hours of explaining, followed by several more hours of unwelcome deep-and-meaningful conversations, to oblige her with. She was probably dying to know just what it was, exactly, that had Tony so unhealthily attached to the kid, and Tony would be more than happy to indulge her if he even knew the answer himself. As it was, though, this was Pepper Potts, aka someone who was exponentially more tactfully subtle than Tony, and she had remained silent, although her eyes continued to pierce him intently at regular intervals.

Tony wrapped an arm around her now, pulling her close and breathing in the delicious scent of Pepper - cherries, vanilla and a touch of peppermint. In the chaos that had been the last few days, he'd barely had any time to talk to her, and it was only now, with a somewhat-healthy, but nevertheless definitely-breathing and most-definitely-not-dead Peter back in the Tower, that he could fully appreciate how much their lack of interaction had taken a toll on him.

He really did need her.

"Pepper?" he said hesitantly.

She responded immediately, her tone easy and casual, and Tony knew that she had been waiting for him to make the first move, rather than initiate it herself. Sensitive and smart, as always.

"Yes, Tony?"

“I’m going to need several truckloads of coffee imported. Immediately. Like, straight away. Oh, and at least fifty boxes of NutriGrain.”

Pepper chuckled softly. “And what do you plan to have the rest of us do? Starve, while you indulge in your countless bowls of cereal and endless supply of coffee?”

“Well, there’s other food in the Tower,” Tony replied easily. “A punnet of ripe strawberries, for example. Would you care for some?”

Pepper rolled her eyes, but the laughter remained imprinted upon her lips, and it was obvious that she was far from annoyed at him. They lapsed back into comfortable silence, both of their eyes fixated on the unconscious kid on the operating table, and Tony mused, idly, whether Pepper was wondering about similar things to him: namely, just how, exactly, one skinny kid could somehow simultaneously cause Tony’s world to crash down and crumble into a million pieces, before seamlessly putting these pieces back together and subsequently ridding the world of its darkness within a matter of minutes.

He supposed he would have to ask the kid himself, one day. Maybe several years down the track. If he ever managed to work up the courage.

“You got him back,” Pepper murmured quietly, a small smile forming on her lips as she watched Peter.

Tony glanced at her and nodded, his eyes returning to Peter as well as he watched the comforting rhythmic movement of the kid’s chest.

“We did.”

Rise, fall. Rise, fall. Rise, fall.

Tony could watch that glorious movement for days.

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Days did indeed pass, and still Tony watched.

He didn’t know what it was, exactly, that kept him glued to the far-from-comfortable hospital chair, head resting in his hands as he stayed by the kid’s bedside day in and day out. Was it the mere sight of Peter; the curly brown hair that he’d grown so fond of ruffling repeatedly, the ghost of those chocolate, puppy-dog eyes that seemed to be permanently imprinted on his eyelids? Was it the way that the kid’s skin seemed to visibly glow just a bit brighter with each passing hour, or the simultaneously slow fading of the black and blue bruises? Or was it still just the rise and fall of his chest, now accompanied with rhythmic sounds to match the action - *in, out, in, out* - a sound that, despite its monotonous nature, was always at the forefront of Tony’s mind, a constant source of relief and satisfaction? Tony guessed the truth probably lay somewhere between all three.

He was experiencing the longest and stablest bout of clear-headedness he’d experienced in days. The worries were still there, of course, a constant source of panic niggling away at him - what would happen when Peter woke up? Would he be traumatised beyond recognition? Would he blame Tony? Would he hate him for not doing anything, back in that terrible, terrible room? What made these concerns all the more alarming was that each of them was entirely plausible, and not just insane, panic-fuelled fantasies created by his incredibly overactive imagination. In fact, he would have probably been driven mad by the completely realistic nature of these worries, if not for the steady rise and fall of the kid’s chest. Whenever Tony began to sink into that black hole of *what-if*, of endless guilt and terror and panic, he focused on the sound and sight of Peter’s

breathing. And that was enough.

The same couldn't be said for his dreams, however. He hadn't gone a single night without being plagued with terrible, horrific memories of the HYDRA base, and Tony hadn't been able to decide which kinds of dreams were worse: the authentic ones, in which he relived the events of Peter's capture in awfully vivid flashbacks, or the illusions, the ones distorted and warped by his own mind, plaguing him with images of Peter screaming for help while he was burnt, instead of holding back his screams...Peter tortured into insanity, unable to talk or move, cowering away from Tony...Peter sobbing, crying, broken, wailing that Tony had failed him, that it was all his fault... Peter *dead*...

If Peter had been awake, Tony was sure he would have made some reference about turn tables turning. As it was, he could barely appreciate the irony of his and Peter's apparent role reversal when it came to the nightmares. He was too busy struggling not to drown in the corrupted mess of his own mind.

But the kid still breathed, and so did Tony.

Alive. Peter was alive.

Nothing mattered, as long as he was still breathing.

Things happened, he supposed. The Tower was repaired within the first twenty-four hours, and the raving press and persistent paparazzi was dealt with within the second. It was now publicly known that HYDRA had attacked the Avengers Tower, and that one of its members had been taken by the organisation itself before being retrieved by the team, though the exact identity was being kept from the public. This was more of a tactical decision than anything else, as Tony knew that if word got out it was *Peter* who had been taken, Child Protection Services would be knocking down their door without seconds, questioning the Avengers' ability to adequately protect minors. (They'd be right, of course, but that was beside the point.) The issues of the Avengers' changed Accords proposition and the legality of Peter staying with the Avengers still remained standing, but the team had collectively decided to address all of these issues *after* Peter was awake and somewhat recovered, if only for the sake of Tony's sanity.

The Avengers came to visit Peter regularly, different groups of them at different times, their faces mirror images of concern for both Peter and Tony. On several occasions, Steve, Rhodey and Sam had attempted to coax Tony into leaving Peter's side, but Tony flatly refused each time. If they wanted him out, they would have to forcibly drag him back again, and Tony was confident that they wouldn't resort to this. The situation was no longer life-threatening, after all, and moreover Tony could tell that Steve felt immensely regretful about holding him back so forcefully. He had even tried to apologise to Tony, on one occasion, but Tony hadn't let him.

"You were doing what had to be done," he said, wincing as he did so, because despite everything they'd been through, it was *still* hard to admit that he'd been wrong to Steve Rogers. "You were right. I *was* too emotionally invested. I couldn't handle it. You did a much better job than me."

Tony's subsequent loss of dignity had been brutal, but almost worth it. The look of admiration and appreciative surprise on Steve's face at Tony's words wasn't one he wasn't likely to forget.

Pepper was his most frequent visitor. She'd adhered to his requests, and had brought him several bowls of NutriGrain and at least five cups of coffee every day without fail. The excessive caffeine intake was more to keep him awake than anything else, because Tony was actively avoiding sleep in the wake of his nightmare problem (although it was far from the first time he'd done something like this). At any rate, Tony had had enough sleepless nights in the past to deal with losing a few of

his z's.

He rambled to Pepper for hours, sometimes. It had taken some coaxing on her part to get him to talk, but once she'd managed to convince Tony to open up, it was like the floodgates had opened and his words came out in a tumbling, unstoppable rush. Half the time, even *he* didn't know what he was saying - his topics ranged from the most mundane monologues, including a long-winded rant about Clint's continued neglect of Barnaby, to much more serious matters, such as what had happened at the HYDRA base and, most challenging of all to voice, the worries that continued to plague him about Peter. Pepper listened to every word he said patiently, seeming to understand that it was a form of therapy for him, a coping mechanism that alleviated some of the stress. He was yet to vocalise the whole *caring-way-too-much-about-Peter* thing, though. He wasn't sure he had the words.

As for the kid himself, well, Bruce and Helen had explained that he was in a comatose state. It wasn't life-threatening, and he didn't need life support as he could still breathe on his own (and thank god for that, because Tony didn't know what the fuck he would have done if that rhythmic rise and fall of Peter's chest had stopped a second time); it was merely his body's way of coping with the immense physical trauma it had endured. Bruce had reassured Tony on countless occasions that Peter would wake up, eventually. It was just a matter of when his body was ready.

And it wasn't until five long days had passed that the moment finally came.

~~~

When Peter first woke up he couldn't quite believe his luck.

He'd been ready - though not willing - to die, yet here he was, decidedly not dead.

It was a wonderful thing, really. He didn't open his eyes just yet, wanting to revel in the relief that came from the very fact that he was *alive*, breathing... though still in a little bit of pain. Nothing specific hurt, but there was a general ache throbbing throughout his body. It was a dull pain, though, and therefore manageable.

He almost fell back into the realm of unconsciousness, longing to obey the deep exhaustion that tugged at his eyelids and weighed down his limbs, but there was something he had to address... someone he had to see.

"T'ny." The word came out slurred, though not unintelligible, and his voice was hoarse and quiet from disuse. How long had he been asleep? He struggled to open his eyes, and after a battle that seemed to drain all his energy from him, he succeeded.

Tony was there, sitting right next to him in a plush armchair, asleep but not peaceful. The man looked worse than Peter felt (and Peter felt like he'd been hit by a bus) - his skin was ashy, and purple shadows stained the skin under his eyes. His face was twisted into a worried expression even in sleep, the normally finely groomed goatee on his jaw was untidy and... was that a bit of nutigrain hidden within the thick hairs? Tony's shabby t-shirt and wrinkled jeans were a far cry from the usual high-end clothes he donned.

He felt a warm, calloused hand in his own and looked down to see that the older man was gripping onto him tightly, even in sleep, as if he was afraid Peter would disappear. There was a bright red



cast (trust Tony to ensure everything matches his colour scheme) on the man's other hand, stretching up to encase his wrist, and Peter felt a twinge of guilt. That hadn't been there in the torture room, which meant Tony had to have gained his injury sometime during the escape.

He hated to wake Tony up, but Peter needed to speak to him, just for a bit. Just so he could calm the roaring storm inside his mind. He cleared his throat and tried again. “*Tony*,” he said, louder than last time and a whole lot clearer. The man jerked to a standing position, startling Peter as he did so and forcing a cry of alarm out of the boy's throat. Images of the Winter Soldier that had beaten him up at the HYDRA base flashed before his eyes; a tall looming figure approaching slowly with measured steps and a blank stare... eyes so lifeless and fist after fist raining down on his face...

“Peter? Peter! Kiddo, you're awake!” a voice yelled, and suddenly the Winter Soldier was gone, replaced by deep brown eyes full of relief and concern. He knew those eyes - had thought of them countless times while he was... trapped. Tony was here, the Winter Soldier wasn't, and Peter was safe.

He pushed away the hissing thoughts that said *he'd never be safe*, that *they'd come for him*, that *they were already here*.

Tony was talking, and Peter tuned back into the one-sided conversation. “-ou have no idea how happy I am to see you awake, kid. I'm so glad you're here, you gave all of us a scare when Thor broke into our press conference saying you were gone, and then when your heart... yeah. You scared us all, Pete, but we're so glad you're safe. *I'm* so glad you're safe,” Tony rambled, the barely concealed hysterics making his voice rise a pitch or two. Peter's breathed a sigh of relief, the man was alright. Everyone was alright, including him.

When the realisation that everything was ok settled in, the adrenaline that had been keeping him awake drained out of his body and his eyelids drooped. “T'ny,” he murmured, and the energy it took to say that one word nearly drop-kicked him straight out of the land of the conscious.

Tony's attention was jerked away from his prattling, and he focused on the exhausted boy lying on the bed. “Aw, go to sleep, Pete. I'll be here when you wake up again.”

“Pr'mise?”

“Yeah, kid. Pinky swear.” But Peter was already out, entrenched in a dreamless sleep.

~~~

The second time Peter awoke, it was to shouting.

Or, really, whisper-shouting, as if the people doing it were trying to convey their feelings without waking him up. How considerate.

Too bad it didn't work.

He lay still and worked to keep his breathing slow and even, which was harder than it sounded because there was an annoying tickling at the base of his nostrils. He was familiar with the feeling, thanks to his many, many stays in the hospital at HYDRA, and knew it was an oxygen cannula - not his favourite thing in the world, but he was aware that it was helping him in some way, so he left it alone.

The itching feeling on the back of his right hand and the crook of his left elbow spoke of IV's, something he was not happy about. Peter hated IV's; they restricted his movement and they were

huge, pointy needles. He - understandably, considering he'd been nothing but a human lab rat for a large majority of his life - was not a fan of needles. Sure, these ones were probably giving him some of the good drugs, if his fuzzy thoughts and heavy limbs were anything to go by, but he still didn't like them.

"When can we see him?" a voice whisper-yelled, and Peter was reminded of the fact that he was a) in a hospital room, and b) supposed to be pretending to be asleep.

"After he wakes up, Clint, *and* after I talk to him. I'm worried about him - Sam said this could have lasting effects on his mental health!" That was Tony, Peter knew - at least the man had followed through on his promise - and the other man was Clint, though Sam had been mentioned. They were talking about someone though, someone whose mental health may be in jeopardy.

"But we've all been waiting to see him, you said he woke up before!"

"Yeah, for two seconds, before he conked out again. All he said was my name, and I don't want to overexert him with visitors before he's ready. We need to treat this situation *delicately*."

"Easy for you to say, you've been with him this whole time. We've barely seen him, and what we *have* seen isn't exactly reassuring - he's so thin! And the machines!" It didn't take a genius to figure out who they were talking about, and Peter, even though his brain was fuzzied by drugs, was of above average intelligence. They were talking about *him*. Why would they say his mental health was in danger? Why did they need to treat his situation delicately? He was *fine*.

"Shush, Clint. You'll wake him up!"

Peter decided this was a good time to step in and reveal his conscious state. "Too late," he murmured, and his tongue felt thick and dry in his mouth. Suddenly he realised how thirsty he was.

"Kid!" Tony huffed, slamming the door in Clint's face and running over to him. Before Peter could blink, there was a styrofoam cup being shoved in his face and he took a tentative sip. Water. Was Tony psychic?

Almost instantly, the dry feeling in his mouth disappeared and Tony chuckled at the desperate way Peter drank the water. "Easy, kid, you'll choke."

Peter slowed down reluctantly. He couldn't help it - the water felt so nice on his parched tongue. He reached a hand up to grab the cup, but winced when the IV in his wrist tugged his hand back. His knee-jerk reaction was to reach over and pull it out, even though he knew that would hurt more in the long run, but a warm hand grabbed his own and pulled it back down. "Ah, ah, ah. No touchies, you need that. It's giving you nutrients."

"Nutrients?" Peter asked. Why did he need nutrients? He couldn't have been asleep *that* long, right?

"Yeah, kid, nutrients. You've been asleep for five days, and you were malnourished before that. Stupid HYDRA guys and their inability to feed-"

Peter stopped listening after that. He'd been asleep for *five days* ? *Five* ?

"I can see the disbelief on you face, Pete, but it really has been five days. You woke up for the first time in the wee hours of the morning and then you went back to sleep. It's late afternoon now, so five days and fourteen hours, roughly."

"*Five days* ?"

"You were - you were really hurt, Peter." The boy in question looked up from his hands when

Tony used his full name - it didn't happen often. "I thought you were gonna - but you didn't, you're fine now..." Tony trailed off, before looking Peter in the eye sharply. "At least, you're physically fine. How's everything... mentally?" Even Tony winced at the way he phrased his question.

Peter considered his answer. Mentally, he could say right off the bat that he was not fine. There were voices in his head screaming at him, saying they were *coming for him*, saying they'd *break him*, calling him an *unwanted freak*. There were shadows flickering in his peripheral vision, a sweaty man with a caterpillar moustache and balding head, a young man with mousy brown hair and a timid expression, a towering silhouette with blank eyes. But he didn't need to burden Tony with any of that. No one had to know that he was, currently, as far from fine as it was possible to be.

"I'm fine, why?" Peter asked innocently, working to keep his tone light.

Tony looked taken aback. "Uh, you went through some pretty traumatic stuff, kiddo. It's okay to not be fine."

"But I am fine, so it's a moot point."

"Are you sure? What you went through?"

"I'm *fine*," Peter snapped, before sighing and sinking further into his cushions. "I'm fine, just tired, a little achy," he repeated, rubbing his face.

Tony sucked on his lip for a second before nodding, though Peter could tell from his expression that they were not done. "Alright, well, if you ever need to talk about anything, I'm here, Sam's here. Everyone's here for you, Pete."

"Thanks," Peter murmured, feeling guilty about his mini temper tantrum.

"Speaking of everyone, they've been biting at the bit to see you, bud. Are you feeling up to visitors?"

Peter perked up at that, ignoring the obvious change of subject. The Avengers? Oh, hell yes. He'd get to apologise for making Nat cry, though he wondered if he should tell everyone that he'd still been.. If not alive, present, when he died. Probably not, if he was trying to convince everyone he was fine. He felt like seeing yourself dead, and seeing everyone else grieving over you *while* you were dead, was not the kind of thing that 'fine' people had in their memories.

Tony got up from where he'd been sitting at the edge of Peter's bed and called the Avengers in. There was the eardrum-rupturing noise of a lot of chairs scraping along the ground as everyone stood up, and Peter winced. His enhanced hearing had not enjoyed that.

Everyone filed in one after the other, each one offering their own version of Tony's, "How's everything... mentally?"

He maintained the 'absolutely fine' facade and smiled at everyone as they entered. Soon enough the room was filled with the familiar banter that followed the group everywhere. Peter was informed of everything he'd missed while he was... away, which was not much apparently. They'd spent all of their time looking for him, and then waiting outside his room when they did find him. Apparently the tower had been fixed, and Peter was shocked to hear the full extent to which HYDRA had gone to in order to get him back. Was he really that important to them?

Someone - probably Clint - had brought games, and they'd played an ungodly amount of Cards Against Humanity. Surprisingly, Pepper won most of the rounds, and they were all slightly

horrified as they discovered the dark extents of the woman's mind. Before that, everyone except Tony and Rhodey had assumed she was a sweet, sensible person. Her only explanation had been, "I grew up with five brothers."

The winner of second place had surprised everyone even more though. No one had expected Captain America to be so dirty, and Peter felt like his soul needed a good hard scrub after hearing some of the sentences that man had created. Bucky had cackled the entire time, knowing what lay behind the Captain's responsible exterior. To be fair, Steve had grown up in the early 1900s, so that was probably a sufficient explanation.

Tony was very put-out by the fact that he had only gotten third. When Clint had pulled out the game, the man had grinned mischievously, muttering something about "beating everyone to a pulp." That hadn't happened though, as both Pepper and Steve had beaten him and everyone else by a long shot.

Bruce had entered at one point in order to check up on Peter (he was *fine*), but had bid a hasty retreat when he saw that they were playing, ignoring everyone's groans of protests and calls to join them. Apparently the 'other guy' didn't handle naughty situations very well, whatever that meant.

Peter found out that the Doctor-Lady who had helped Bruce patch him up was named Helen Cho, and he made a mental note to thank her in person - that was, if he could convince his screaming brain that she wasn't a threat.

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Hours later, Bruce came in and hustled all of the Avengers out of the room, ignoring their loud complaints and insisting that Peter needed his rest if he ever wanted to leave the Med Bay. The man had looked in Tony's direction and opened his mouth as if to tell him he had to leave too, but the billionaire beat him to the punch.

"Nope."

"Tony-"

"*No* , Bruce."

"You need-"

"*Bruce* , I'm not leaving."

Bruce sighed, rubbing his temples. He looked exhausted, and Peter really hoped it wasn't because of him. "Alright, but at least take a shower, you smell horrible. That's my one condition."

"Ugh, fine," Tony grouched, trudging towards the bathroom attached to Peter's hospital room. Damn, even the medical rooms in the Tower were fancy; they had an ensuite and everything.

Bruce moved towards Peter's IV that gave him his meds and fiddled with the dial. "How're your pain levels, Pete? I can up the dosage of your pain medication a little bit more if you need."

"Nah, it's alright, Bruce. It's only a little sore, I can deal. I don't like how fuzzy it makes my brain feel."

"That's perfectly normal," Bruce nodded. "Okay, I'm going to get some sleep, and I suggest you do too, if you want to get well enough to leave."

Peter groaned, he'd been sleeping practically all day, though the few hours he'd spent with the Avengers had tired him out more than he'd like to admit. "When, exactly, can I leave this place?"

“You’ll be here for at least a week, more if you don’t give your body what it needs to heal, which is rest. Goodnight, Peter.”

“Night, Bruce.”

The man smiled and closed the door on his way out. Peter was left alone with his thoughts, and that wasn’t a place he really wanted to be at all, so he started reciting the periodic table song to distract himself. He was up to Arsenic when Tony reentered the room looking clean and a lot fresher.

They said their goodnights and Tony settled into a chair at Peter’s side. The boy tossed and turned, trying to find a comfortable position around the IV’s that were hindering where he could put his arms.

“Are you alright, kid?” Tony questioned, and Peter could only just see his outline in the darkness. What was with people asking if he was alright? He was *fine* (maybe if he told himself that enough it would start to be true).

“Yeah, just a little hyped up is all. Can’t sleep.” Peter didn’t mention that he was afraid to close his eyes. If he closed his eyes he would fall asleep, and if he fell asleep then the dreams would come. Dreams would turn into nightmares and Peter’s mantra of, “I’m fine,” would be proven wrong. “Can we go for a walk or something? Just to get rid of my energy, then I’ll go straight back to bed, I promise.” Maybe if he tired himself out enough, he could fall into a dreamless sleep.

Tony sighed, looking like he was arguing with himself. After a long time, he said, “I guess we could go for a very short walk. Maybe to the waiting room and back, there’s a little kitchenette there, so I could make you a glass of warm milk. Might help you sleep.”

“Yes, perfect. Thanks, Tony.”

“Alright, let’s get you up. FRIDAY, lights at ten percent please,” Tony spoke softly, and the total darkness of the room was quickly lightened slightly.

Tony helped Peter stand up, grabbing the portable IV stands and handing one to Peter so he could lean against it, while he maneuvered the other one. The man had a firm grip on Peter’s waist, because the boy’s legs were shaky and weak after days of disuse.

They made their way slowly down the hall, and Peter got more accustomed to walking, relying less on the IVs and and Tony as they moved along.

Soon, they reached the kitchenette, and Tony eased him down into a chair. Peter was panting, air heaving in and out of his chest, but he could see the older man doubting his decision, so he did his best to slow his breathing and appear *fine* .

That was when everything went downhill.

Peter was casually looking around the kitchenette, taking in the quaint, homey decor, when he saw the knife rack. Logically, he knew it was just a knife rack. He knew, logically, that the only person there was Tony, and Tony would never hurt him. He knew, logically, that everything was fine. But he was a hormonal, traumatised (though he was loathe to admit it), teenager, and logic flew out the window when those knives transformed into scalpels.

Scalpels held in clammy hands, scalpels digging into his skin and causing him *pain, pain, pain* .

His breathing, which he’d just managed to control, sped up again, wheezing in and out of his lungs.

His heart sped up right along with his oxygen intake, and it made him feel dizzy. These were the anxiety symptoms he'd missed so much while having his weird, out of body experience. Why on earth had he missed them? They *sucked* .

Before he knew it, Tony was in front of him and coaching him through the familiar process of calming down from a panic attack. "Breathe, kiddo, breathe. Just like this, remember?" Tony said, taking his own, exaggerated breaths and placing Peter's hand on his chest. "Feel my heartbeat, you're here, not there. You're safe, I've got you. You're *safe* ."

Safe.

He was safe.

Slowly, slowly, his breathing calmed, as did his heart. Tony waited a few more minutes before fixing him with a glare. "You still wanna tell me you're fine, Pete?"

Peter gulped, looking down at his hands. *Someone was in trouble* .

## Chapter End Notes

We pray that this was a suitable next chapter, as we know some of you had very high hopes.

Feel free to comment or leave kudos, it makes our day :D

# Ice Age: Meltdown

## Chapter Notes

What's up my dudes, we're back with another chapter! Sorry about the wait on this one, we're back to school so updates might have to slow down a bit, but they definitely won't be stopping entirely. Heads up, we have yet another pun for the title of this fic (it's becoming a bad habit of ours) and this chapter is also a bit of an angst fest (another bad habit) so get ready for that. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Someone was in trouble.*

*It was him.*

Tony looked at him, concern and frustration bubbling in his eyes. “That was a panic attack, Peter. People who are fine don’t have panic attacks.”

“But I had them *before* my temporary incarceration as well! I’m fine, better than before, even. In the immortal words of Kelly Clarkson, ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’.”

*He didn’t feel strong. He felt like fractured glass, one blow away from shattering into a million, irreparable pieces.*

“Is that what we’re calling your kidnapping and torture from the very same organisation that forced you to become a child assassin? Temporary incarceration?”

Peter, with all his stubborn, teenage attitude, decided that it was a good time to start humming the song ‘Stronger’, from which he had taken the lyric he’d quoted at Tony a few seconds earlier. In hindsight, it wasn’t his smartest idea.

“Hey, stop it, Peter. Stop fucking around, this is serious. I’m trying to help you, but I can’t do that if you don’t open up. I need to know what’s wrong!”

“*Nothing* is wrong, Tony.”

*Everything is wrong. My thoughts shouldn’t be so chaotic, they shouldn’t change and slide away and fade into nothing before I can even get a hold on them. I’m hovering on the edge of a panic attack 24/7, and I feel weak. Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

“Alright, I call bullshit on your ‘I’m fine’ shtick, but it’s late and you need to rest,” Tony commanded, shooting Peter a stern glare before standing up to put the milk carton back in the fridge. Peter hadn’t even lasted the amount of time that Tony needed to warm up a glass of milk before he’d melted down.

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

They made their slow way back to Peter’s bland hospital room, and even the act of stepping through the doorway made him feel *trapped, trapped, trapped*.

The walls were too white, the shadows cast by the dim lights were too dark, looming threateningly,

their blackened limbs stretching and distorting hideously.

A blink later and the twisting shapes were gone, leaving nothing but Peter's galloping heart as evidence of their existence. Was he going crazy? Was this what insanity felt like?

*Yeah, you're crazy now. Shameful, can't even deal with a little nighttime trip to the kitchen without losing your shit.*

Tony helped him into his bed - *because he was too weak to do it himself. Weak, pathetic, worthless* - oblivious to the inner torment raging in Peter's mind, but that was how he wanted it, wasn't it? He didn't want to burden the others, especially Tony, with his pitiful state. He refused to do that. He wasn't a child, and so he could handle his own problems without running to his dad Tony. Besides, it was weak to ask for help.

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

"Alright, kiddo, feeling ready to sleep yet?" Tony asked, in a tone that offered no other choice. Peter pointedly avoided the sharp eyes boring into his face - if the man caught even a hint of the internal storm roiling behind his eyes, he'd never believe Peter's 'fine' facade, though the panic attack had screwed up practically any chance he'd had to begin with. And so Peter nodded, humming a short, "yep," while fiddling with the thin sheets covering his legs.

Tony cleared his throat, and Peter could hear the man fidgeting; his fingers dancing together while his expensive, polished leather shoe tapped out a fast-paced rhythm on the floor. "Do you, uh, want me to stay? With you, I mean. I can go, if you want."

Every atom of Peter's body screamed for him to ask the man to *stay, please stay*. But that would imply that he was anything less than fine, and he couldn't have that, so instead he shook his head, smiling wryly. "I'm capable of going to beddy-byes by myself, Tony. Besides, you look like you could use a decent sleep in a good bed yourself. Trust me, I'll be fine."

*I can't do this, please, I need you. Stay, please. Don't leave me.*

Peter didn't miss the way the older man's face fell slightly, before he nodded and smiled once more and turned on his heel, marching out the door.

*No, no don't go. Please, I'm sorry, don't leave!*

He put both hands over his mouth, needing to physically restrain himself from reaching out and shouting Tony's name, and his whole body shuddered when the man turned the corner and disappeared out of sight.

Peter ignored the wetness in his eyes.

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

~~~

I'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

The kid's words echoed in his brain, a haunting, ghostly mantra, playing themselves over and over again until, if he tried hard enough, he could maybe, just maybe, pretend that they were true.

I'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

He shouldn't be worrying about this. The kid had said he was fine, and that should be enough. Tony trusted Peter. Tony trusted the kid to be honest with him. Tony trusted the kid's trust in Tony-

I'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

Abruptly, he stopped walking down the corridor.

The kid was not fine.

Groaning to himself, Tony slammed his head against the wall, barely feeling the resounding thud of dull pain that reverberated around his skull as a result. He'd been craving a nice decent bang around the head for some time now - ever since Peter was taken, basically - but having done the act, now, he could safely say that the effect hadn't been nearly as calming as he'd hoped. All he'd managed to do was give himself a pounding headache.

What the fuck are you going to do with the kid?

He was in it deep, this time. He was in way too deep and the water was completely over his head and he was totally submerged, drowning in his utter incapability, his complete lack of qualification and education on what to do about this - this - he didn't even know what to call it. He was so laughably out of his element, it was slightly ludicrous - he'd just taken Peter into the *kitchen*, for god's sakes, a room that was *most well known for displaying knives in plain sight*. If he'd had even an ounce of common sense, Tony would have foreseen that knives could potentially, just possibly, just maybe, be ever so *slightly* triggering for Peter.

What was *wrong* with him? How had he ended up like this - a grade-A asshole who could pull out a snarky one-liner dissing someone's outfit in the blink of an eye, yet couldn't seem to do *anything* even remotely right when it came to, you know, being a normal, emotionally supportive, empathetic human being?

And thanks to Tony, the kid had had an anxiety attack, and now he was alone in his room with nothing but his own haunted, traumatised memories for company, because *Tony had left*.

Because the kid asked you to.

But that didn't make a difference. If anything, it made it worse. If Tony had been the stable, unemotionally constipated, calm, balanced fatherly figure that he should have been for Peter, right from day dot, he was sure the kid wouldn't feel the need to play the 'I'm-fine' card now. If Tony had talked more with Peter about his experiences at HYDRA, instead of just trying to bury them

deep in the back of Peter's mind, underneath trivial, stupid, *pointless* distractions like laser tag and Christmas shopping, the majority of which backfired anyway and ended up causing some other burden to add to Peter's already overloaded shoulders - if he'd stopped trying to corrupt the kid with his own, unhealthy coping mechanisms, in other words - then maybe Peter would be more open with him, now, when it really mattered. Maybe he'd have asked Tony to stay.

Shit, he really wished Peter had asked him to stay.

The urge to go back into the room was almost overwhelming, but he'd already caused enough damage. If Peter wanted to be left alone, Tony would respect that, painful as it was to do so. After everything that had happened, he felt it was the least he could do.

But Peter's second request was much harder to respect. Although Tony was tired beyond the point of basic human functionality, although every fibre in his body was practically screaming with exhaustion, begging for relief in the form of sleep, he forced himself to stay awake.

He might have been the world's worst form of emotional support, but even Tony could connect the dots. Panic attacks and nightmares came hand in hand. If there was one, the other would soon follow. He knew from personal experience.

So he stayed awake, watching the nightmare detector, waiting for the tell-tale spike in Peter's heart rate.

He didn't have to wait very long.

~~~

Morning came in the form of fractals of light shining into Peter's room, dim and tranquil. The calming, grey quality to the air almost made Peter forget about the nightmares which had plagued the few hours of sleep he had gotten.

Tony hadn't ended up staying away for very long, because when Peter woke in the middle of the night, gasping and clutching at his chest because *he could not breathe*, the man had been there, voice steady and calm as he assured Peter that he was *safe*, that he wasn't *there* anymore, that no one would ever hurt him again.

Peter had let his facade slip, just a little bit, after that. He'd let a drop of the desperation and helplessness that was broiling inside of him leak out into his voice when he asked Tony to stay. The man had done nothing but smile and nod, settling himself down into the reclining chair a few metres away from Peter's own bed.

Those three metres might as well have been hundreds of kilometres, because Peter was still pretty doped up on the good stuff, and he couldn't feel his toes.

The nightmares were still fresh in his mind, twisting shadows and sharp blows in a dark room. Cold, cold water - where's the air, there's *supposed to be air* - and crimson blood pooling on chilled, grey concrete, leading back to a boy that had sacrificed everything for a stranger.

But Tony was there, and Tony was a beacon in his night. A bright, warm light that promised safety and security. Nothing could go wrong while Tony was there, because Tony was his shield; as long as Tony was around, he was safe. As long as Tony was around, he couldn't be touched.

Peter was jolted out of his thoughts by Bruce. The man was standing in the doorway of his hospital room, looking pointedly at Peter, or more specifically, the outrageously prominent shadows under his eyes. He chuckled nervously, lifting his non-broken collarbone (though at this point the only thing that happened when he moved it was a little twinge; much better than the familiar agony that he knew came with broken bones - all the food and rest he was getting seemed to be helping with speeding up his healing) in a half-shrug.

“Couldn’t get comfy,” he said, and while it was a statement in theory, it came out sounding more like a question than anything else.

Finally, Bruce shifted his disapproving gaze to Tony, who was sprawled out on his recliner and snoring lightly. The man’s hair was ruffled, and the singlet and track pants that he used as pajamas sometimes were also hopelessly wrinkled. The deep shadows under Tony’s eyes, which were only a shade or two lighter than Peter’s own, made the boy’s stomach twinge with guilt. How much sleep had the older man lost because of him?

There had been the months before his temporary incarceration, in which he’d woken up sweating and panting almost every night, and Tony had either already been there to comfort him, or was on his way. Then there was the week that had passed while he’d been in captivity. Rhodey had insinuated that Tony had barely slept during that time, instead devoting his energy to locating him and then devising the rescue plan that the Avengers had used to break him out. And now, well, there certainly wouldn’t be an abundance of sleep for a while, considering Peter had woken them both up with his nightmares no less than four times last night. They were worse than before, more graphic and less vague, which led him to believe that they wouldn’t be slowing down, let alone stopping, for a long time to come.

Any chance he had of convincing Tony that he was *absolutely fine* had flown out the window somewhere in the mess of last night, but he still had hope with the others (he was fooling himself. There was no way Tony wasn’t going to report back to everyone else, informing them of Peter’s progress in his recovery. He let himself dream anyway).

That was why, for the next three days, Peter did nothing but smile, joke and laugh with the Avengers, who spent almost every second of every day crammed into his (certainly not small, but not large enough to hold six humans, an android, two super soldiers, and a *super-buff god* ) hospital room.

He was sure they had better things to do, other than play Cards Against Humanity, Monopoly, Uno and the Game of Life with a slightly traumatised teenager. The Tower probably still needed some organising, the press was no doubt seconds away from breaking down the door and they most likely had some personal errands of some kind that they needed to run.

Nevertheless, they all showed up at eight am (the beginning of his visiting hours; set by Bruce), without fail, arms stacked with board games, movies and snacks. Bruce almost always confiscated the junk food, saying that Peter needed *good* food to help him heal, but the food usually mysteriously reappeared within minutes (Peter’s bet was that Clint used his innate knowledge of the vents to nick it all back). He wasn’t complaining though - they’d had a surprising lack of Doritos and gummy worms at the HYDRA base, so he was going to snatch up every shot he got to eat Trolli gummy worms - nothing could beat them.

Besides, food always tasted better when you weren’t supposed to have it.

And now, Peter could officially say he’d seen every single Ice Age movie. Clint had mentioned it in the middle of their Monopoly game, and, upon noticing Peter’s blatant confusion, had assumed (correctly) that he’d never seen it.

The man had been shocked, and then immediately announced the predicament to the rest of the Avengers.

Peter was sure he'd never seen them move so fast before.

One minute they'd been lazing around, gorging themselves on junk food and cackling evilly over piles of Monopoly money, and the next they were a flurry of movement, shouting, throwing random necessities at each other as they raced around the room in a frenzy. He was pretty sure he heard someone yell, "code blue, I repeat, code blue," and the intensity with which they pushed a bowl of popcorn (procured from God-knows-where) into his arms and gathered around him as the movie began made Peter laugh. It was enough to make him forget for just a moment about the memories inside his mind that wouldn't leave him alone no matter how hard he tried to push them away.

In the end, Peter decided he'd liked the third one the best. Nothing could beat Ice Age: Dawn Of The Dinosaurs, and there was something so silly about Buck (his favourite character - the guy was so *cool*, and hilariously paranoid) swinging from the tonsils of a dinosaur named Rudy, that helped him to forget about the not-so-silly realities of his life.

Crash and Eddie, from Ice Age: The Meltdown, had been his second favourite characters though. He could relate to their chaotic energy on a spiritual level (that was a phrase he'd learn during his many, many hours of browsing the internet, and he was resolved to use it as much as humanly possible).

The only annoying thing about the Avengers' constant presence was the continuous questions that came with it - apparently he'd been right in his assumption that Tony would pass along all he'd learnt to everyone else, though he wasn't necessarily happy to be right this time.

All day long he was peppered with concerned, pitying voices, asking if he was okay, how he was doing, if he was alright, if he needed *anything*. It seemed that no matter how many times he told them, "I'm okay," "I'm fine," "No, I don't need anything," they refused to believe him and never ceased their efforts. All the while he struggled to ignore the shrieks of help from the back of his mind. He ignored the hooks too, the little hooks that were always trying to pull him under the surface of his memories, down through the dark, unorganised sea. He knew if he sank down there, he'd never fully emerge again.

Sam had tried to go all therapist-y on him again, but Peter had managed to shut that conversation down quickly enough by suggesting another round of Uno. He was just scared of what would happen if the man managed to get him alone (which probably wouldn't take long, if all the other Avengers were as determined to 'help' him as they seemed), because he had an uncanny knack for digging straight under the walls you'd put up in your mind, and Peter really did *not* want him doing that.

After three days, Bruce gave him the all-clear, but assigned him another three whole days of bed rest.

"Just be glad it's not for longer," the man had said, squinting at Peter in warning, and he had to admit that the man made a good point. Without his enhanced healing, he would have been much farther back in his recovery. Now, the only things that bothered him were the occasional twinges from his mostly- healed broken bones and cuts and the fact that he still couldn't walk more than the length of the hallway by himself without collapsing in a sweating, over-exerted pile of Peter (he was going to discount the nightmares that fraught his unconscious hours as an 'issue', because they weren't. He was fine. *Totally fine* ).

Apparently the week of sitting down, not moving and not eating had taken its toll on his muscles, because his strength was currently equivalent to that of a lazy, uncoordinated four-year-old. Bruce assured him that once he got his weight back up, he would start to build his much-needed muscle mass again (he looked like a string of spaghetti at the moment), which was another reason why Peter wasn't at all opposed to the junk food that the others brought along with them when they visited.

Bruce had tried to give Peter a wheelchair for the journey, but he'd promptly refused it, saying he could use the opportunity to stretch his legs. The doctor had sighed, and Peter felt a little bad - he hadn't exactly been the *best* patient, and he certainly hadn't listened to all the instructions he'd been given in order to speed up his physical recovery (Peter had not missed the emphasis Bruce had put on *physical*, as if to remind Peter that he wasn't going to solve his mental issues with a lot of sleep and a sizeable portion of protein).

The walk up to Tony's floor was embarrassing, at best, though Peter was proud to say he made it all the way to the elevator door before he even needed to put a hand on Tony's shoulder to support himself. By the end of the elevator ride, however, it was a different story. He was pretty sure he was leaning almost all of his body weight against the billionaire - were elevator rides always this long? Did they usually stretch on forever and ever, until his legs were shaking and his breath was coming in harsh, wheezing pants?

"You doing okay, Pete?" Tony asked, shifting his arm slightly from where it was wrapped under Peter's arms, trying to keep him up. That damned question, always catching him in the worst of times when it was nearly impossible to play himself off as 'fine'.

Nevertheless, he tried. "Yep," Peter wheezed, trying valiantly not to collapse onto the ground. "Just... could probably do with - with *a little* rest."

"Nearly there, kiddo, I swear."

Peter couldn't find the energy necessary to do anything other than nod weakly.

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

By the time they reached his room (a temporary one that Pepper had put together while Peter had been recovering in the Med Bay. It was just down the hall from his old one - the Tower was full of empty rooms. His other one had been trashed during the attack, and Peter didn't really need the negative connotations that came with it on top of his already existing troubles. *Weak, pathetic, worthless*, his brain chanted. *Yeah, I know, I know*), Tony was practically dragging him across the floor. He couldn't figure out how to function, how to move his muscles, so he resorted to just trying to remember that breathing was an important thing that he should definitely keep doing.

His cheeks burned red as Tony tucked him into bed - *tucked him in*, what was he, five? - and ran a hand through Peter's hair. It had become their thing, a question and reassurance all in one. An, *are you okay?* And an, *I'm right here*, all at once, like a secret message meant just for Peter.

Just as he got comfortable, his bladder made itself known, and his cheeks, which had only just started to return to their normal shade, flared bright red again. Tony seemed to notice the sudden change in his demeanour and the way he squirmed in his sheets, because the man cocked his head, a question glinting in his dark eyes. "Something wrong, kid?"

And how many times had Peter heard *that* question over the last few days? Except this time, there actually was something wrong. Because of course, nothing had been wrong the other times. He had been fine.

“I - I’ve gotta go to the bathroom,” he confessed, feeling the tips of his ears start to burn, something that only happened on the rare occasion he found himself to be deeply humiliated.

*This kind of qualified* , he thought, good ol’ Gen Z sarcasm leaching into his brain even though he felt dead on his feet.

Tony obviously didn’t get it. “Why’re you acting so embarrassed? We all do it. In fact, I know that Clint once did it seventeen times in one day because Sam dared him to drink three liters of Gatorade, but that’s another story for another time.”

“Because,” Peter began, trying to convey the message with his eyes. Surely Tony wouldn’t make him say it out loud. There was no response from the man other than a confused hum, and Peter groaned. Apparently, he would have to say it out loud.

“I can’t move.” And it was the truth. His limbs felt like lead, immovable monuments of heavy iron that had spent centuries glued to the ground, and they weren’t about to break that streak. Even if he *could* fathom being able to get out of bed, his breath was still coming in exhausted pants, and he wouldn’t trust himself with walking in a straight line if his life depended on it.

“Oh, okay, uh, that’s all good. We can fix that,” Tony said, his voice faltering slightly at the beginning of his sentence. “Yeah, I can help you.”

And Peter felt *shame* . Shame because of just how little he was actually capable of - something Tony had noticed, clearly, if the falter was anything to go by. He could end a person’s life five hundred different ways, and that was the extent of his abilities. He was nothing more than a perfectly-crafted killing machine - he couldn’t even perform a basic bodily function without needing help.

He was weak.

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

And then the hooks were sinking into his skin, clawing and dragging and pulling, submerging him in the memories and he couldn’t breathe because there was *water in his lungs* , but he could still hear the air whooshing in and out of his lungs.

*It didn’t make sense* .

Fists were raining down on his face and he tried to lift his arms to stop them, but he couldn’t move, and there was still water in his lungs, sloshing around and feeling *wrong* . Wrong, wrong, wrong.

There were bodies, cold and pale, in the corner of the bathroom. The bathroom? How had he gotten into the bathroom?

He vaguely registered that Tony was there, holding him up as he went about his business.

He was way too far under the surface of his memories to feel the embarrassment that should have been dominating his every thought.

Instead, all he could see was death. Death. Death. *Death* . All around him. Mousy was in that corner, bloodied and still. The boy, his ex-partner in missions, that had wanted freedom, that Peter had been forced to kill for his insubordination.

The dead body of a young girl, a clean bullet hole in the center of her forehead; a blameless victim. Her only crime? She’d gotten in the way.

The slumped husk of a person that he'd been ordered to kill, and he'd asked no questions. He hadn't even seen their face. That person had known nothing but the inside of a burlap sack in their last moments, and the unfairness of the cruel act had made Peter's chest ache in a way that he hadn't felt before. He knew now that the emotion was a cocktail mix of sorrow, mourning and guilt.

Maybe it was a 'the straw that broke the camel's back' kind of situation, but the last memory undid him. He couldn't take it; so many deaths, so many nameless faces that had met their untimely end because of him, and yet, by some cruel twist of fate, he was still alive.

He'd heard of survivor's guilt, but he wasn't a faultless survivor; he was a killer, a murderer. And he was not okay, he knew that, but he couldn't admit it to himself, let alone anyone else. He didn't deserve the opportunity to whine and complain about all of the insignificant troubles he'd come across in his life, when some people weren't even on this Earth to experience their own - all because of him.

They were halfway back to his bed when the dam broke. He couldn't hold his desolation in anymore - it felt like his sadness was carving a hole in his chest, and the longer he held it in, the bigger the hole grew. He felt hollow, empty. Drowning in nothingness.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and Tony's arms tightened around his thin form. The man was practically carrying him by now, and Peter felt so weak.

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

He was nothing.

*I am nothing.*

"Sorry for what, bud?" And the kindness in Tony's voice, the unfiltered concern, was what made the first heavy, wet sob well up in his chest. He didn't deserve the kind of love that Tony offered; the unconditional kind, because that man loved and loved and loved, expecting nothing in return. Peter was lucky to have met Tony, but he didn't deserve the man.

His "I'm sorry"s became like a mantra then, as he cried, loudly and messily for the first time, not even bothering to hold back anymore. Tony held him, rocked him back and forth as he steered them onto the bed, and Peter could do nothing but curl up against his side and relish in the secure feeling that the man's strong arms brought him.

Eventually, his sobbing quietened, and he was left with a running nose, pounding headache and heavy eyes.

He hadn't cried much at HYDRA - he hadn't been allowed, and after the punishment he'd received for the first few times it happened, with threats of worse things to come if he allowed it to occur again, he had learnt to control the tears - but he decided now that he hadn't missed out on much. Crying was not particularly enjoyable, and while the actual process was cathartic, the after-effects were not fun to deal with, and they made his already bad mood even worse.

However, his sob-sesh had drained him (both of tears and energy) and the heaviness of his eyelids, combined with his pre-existing exhaustion (a side-effect of not having had a full night's sleep in at least two weeks) led to him falling asleep with Tony beside him.

The last thing he remembered was Tony running one hand through Peter's own hair while the other rubbed slow, methodic circles on his back.

As he drifted off, he heard the man whisper, “You will be okay, Peter. I’ll make sure of it.”

*Oh, Tony , he thought, I don’t deserve to be okay.*

*Because I’m weak.*

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

~~~

He should have done it a long time ago. Looking back, Tony didn’t understand why he hadn’t acted sooner.

Maybe it was that godforsaken pride, an undesirable flaw in character of his that he never could seem to shake off, no matter how many millions he added to his brand name by the day. Money didn’t buy happiness - he knew that better than anyone - but it certainly didn’t buy modesty and humbleness, either. And no matter how hard he tried, Tony seemed to have a serious issue with the whole *asking for help* thing. It was much easier to let himself drown in his own, self-created mess, shutting out the rest of his world as he surrounded himself with his suits instead, their robotic, passive, clinical masks somehow so much more easier to deal with than the eyes of the people trying to help him. Tony Stark did not ask people for help, and he certainly didn’t go to them willingly.

But that was Tony Stark, not Peter.

And he couldn’t deny it - *Peter needed help*.

He supposed, if he was being honest with himself, that the notion of going to the other Avengers had been building under the surface for a while now. They’d definitely been helpful back in the Med Bay, entertaining Peter with all the games and the junk food, smuggled in away from Bruce’s disapproving eyes, and Tony hadn’t missed how Peter seemed to glow just a bit brighter in their presence. The kid loved being surrounded by them, and Tony didn’t blame him; combined together, Tony and the team collectively spoiled Peter more than about fifty hunchbacked, baking-club grannies combined. And the kid deserved it, too. He deserved it and so much more, after what he’d been through.

But being spoiled rotten clearly hadn’t been enough. The gestures were nice, but they were shallow. Five victorious games of Uno didn’t cure nightmares. Making the most money in Game of Life didn’t prevent panic attacks. Roasting Tony with that damnable teenage smartassery in Cards Against Humanity didn’t make the memories magically disappear.

And Tony had thought he could help Peter in other ways. He’d tried to be there for the kid. Really, he had.

But Peter had just cried on his shoulder for *thirty-seven consecutive minutes*.

Thirty-seven fucking minutes.

And Tony had just sat there, patting his shoulder awkwardly, blabbering nonsensical phrases about being alright and not needing to apologise whilst, internally, he screamed with rage. Rage at HYDRA, at what they had done to Peter, at how they had ruined him. Rage at Peter, for thinking

he had to apologise, for saying ‘sorry’ over and over when *it wasn’t the kid’s fault, it wasn’t his, it was Tony’s*. And rage at himself, for once again proving how massively, entirely, laughably *incapable* he was.

He couldn’t do this. He wasn’t cut out for this. He could see that Peter was suffering, and it was *killing him*, eating away at his insides, and it was so much worse because the kid was trying to *hide* it. Trying to bury it, instead of coming to terms with it. Feeding him lies, instead of admitting that he wasn’t okay.

He couldn’t do this. Tony needed backup.

He needed help.

He needed the team.

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“It’s official. Bed rest isn’t helping. Stolen junk food is proving to be entirely ineffective. Asking if the kid is okay is doing absolutely fucking nothing.”

He was ranting. Tony was fully aware that he was ranting. But he couldn’t stop. The words were tumbling out faster than he could even hear them, all the built-up concerns about Peter that had been plaguing him ever since the kid woke up in the Med Bay coming out in one uncontrollable rush.

“Watching Ice Age is useless and blowing kisses of farewell is laughably futile and don’t even think about letting the kid win another round of Monopoly, because that’s just as damn fucking *pointless* as every other lame distraction strategy we’ve tried.”

The Avengers were gathered around the communal area, perched on stools and sitting on couches, the palpable tension of the atmosphere reflected visibly in the stiffness of their postures. Every pair of eyes in the room was fixed on Tony, but for once, it wasn’t in defensive anger, because for once, Tony wasn’t ranting *at* them. He was ranting *to* them, and they were just as concerned as he was - although Tony had to admit, some of them did a much better job hiding it than him. Bucky’s blank mask of robotic calm was rivaled only by Natasha’s lifeless, vacant stare.

The same couldn’t be said for Clint, however, who was frowning worriedly, running a frantic hand through his hair.

“Well, what else do you suggest?” he said tersely. “We’ve asked about five hundred different ways if the kid’s okay, and every answer has been just as fake as the last. *I’m fine, don’t worry about me, everything’s perfect, nothing’s wrong*. If I had a dollar for every time the little squirt’s deflected my questions with a quip about the infamous Mario Kart Dethroning Day...”

It was a true testament to the extent of Clint’s concern for Peter that he *didn’t* add a snotty, sore-loser comment in there about the loss of dignity that had come with Peter’s triumph over him in the game. Even Tony himself found no humour in the subject, which was no small feat - any mention of the Mario Kart contest and Clint’s subsequent dethroning usually was enough to send him into hysterics.

How long ago that day of happiness seemed now.

“You think I have any ideas?” Tony replied cuttingly. “Why do you think I called you all here, for an evening binge of *Friends*?”

Clint opened his mouth to shoot back a defensive retort, but Steve cut across him.

“Look, Tony, I’m just as worried as you are,” he began in that placating tone that Tony hated so very much, “and I know this is hard to hear, but...as far as I can tell, the best thing we can give him is time. Peter’s not going to heal magically overnight. It’ll be a rough process, but he’ll get there eventually.”

“I *know* that,” Tony said forcefully, “but don’t you see? He can’t just heal magically on his *own*, either, without help, and what we’re doing in terms of *help* is proving to be even more pointless than trying to teach you and your fellow Mr Fossil over here the ins and outs of circuit boarding.”

Steve rolled his eyes at the jibe, but didn’t retaliate; maybe he’d realised that Tony’s cutting remarks weren’t directed at *him*, per se, but rather just an overall outlet for the suffocating, raging frustration that whipped inside him like a tornado. He had a bad habit of doing that. Pepper had pointed it out on multiple occasions, but he was yet to fix the issue. Whenever Tony got stressed, he lashed out.

Another one of his long list of character flaws.

“What’s the sudden rush, anyway?” Steve asked. “I get that you’re worried, but I thought we were making progress. Bruce just released him from the Med Bay, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, and he was about five seconds into his new room before he had a complete breakdown,” Tony said grimly.

Okay, so telling the team about Peter’s meltdown probably wasn’t the most decent of moves, but Tony was out of options. He’d been reduced to a ranting, raving, shaking mess, blurting things about Peter and their useless distractions and God knew what else, probably a whole lot of personal shit that he’d already forgotten about, in an act of sheer desperation, because *Tony was scared*. Evil, world-domination-seeking villains were a walk in the park compared to this; never-ending hordes of alien armies had absolutely nothing on what Tony was feeling right now. Terror, pure and raw and undiluted.

He’d gotten Peter back, but it felt like he was losing the kid all over again.

“A breakdown?” Natasha asked, showing the first hint of concern behind that expressionless mask. “Define breakdown, Tony.”

“Crying, unnecessary apologies, barely aware of himself, lost in a load of traumatic memories no doubt, the whole shebang,” Tony listed off, his heart pounding with every word. “The kid was mad at himself because he needed help to get to the bathroom, and I don’t know what it was - pride? Embarrassment? Just being over-tired and traumatised in general? - but for whatever reason, he just completely lost it. Didn’t even try to keep his ‘I’m-fine’ thing going.”

The team was dead silent now, staring at Tony in complete shock. There was an eerie, horrified quality to the room, and Tony tried to ignore the guilty lump constricting his throat, screaming of betrayal, shrieking that he’d just violated Peter’s privacy in the worst possible way - but he couldn’t keep it to himself a moment longer. It was killing him. He needed help.

“Well, that’s certainly a change from *don’t worry about me*, ” Clint murmured, horrified, after several moments of silence.

“But you can bet Tony’s whole bank account that it won’t last,” Bucky spoke up quietly. “If anything, when tomorrow does come, his act will be shoved in our faces ten times harder.”

"I agree," Wanda nodded. "He'll try and convince you it was nothing, go back to that pretence of *sunshine and daisies*. I mean, this is Peter we're talking about."

"I know," Tony muttered, running a hand through his hair, "trust me, *I know*. The kid was mortified about needing help walking. This is the final nail in the coffin."

"So, if I'm reading this conversation correctly," Vision slotted in, "you're saying an intervention is necessary?"

*An intervention.* The words sounded so cold, so heartless, so *cruel*. Tony shuddered and shook his head, knowing that when it came to Peter, trying to force his hand would only increase the difficulty of the situation.

"Not a forceful one, no," Tony said slowly. "But I think...if we all approach him together - calmly, of course, don't rain down on him like a horde of bats with rabies - but if we try to talk him into it as a group, with all of you there...well, it might be more effective than just me, anyway."

Even Steve was nodding, now, his earlier scepticism replaced by growing determination, and Tony could practically see the gears turning in his brain. "Maybe Tony's right. Maybe what Peter needs isn't what we've been giving him - all these off-handed comments about whether he's okay, pretending it's no big deal, just a casual, throwaway question - because if we act like it's nothing, then isn't Peter completely justified to do the same?"

Natasha had caught on, too. "We'll speak to him. All of us, all together, so he knows that it's a matter we really, really care about," she said slowly. "Don't be overbearing, don't be forceful - like Tony said - but we just need to let him know that we're really worried about him, and that it's not okay to ignore these problems, and that we should have addressed them sooner."

"That he's been through a very traumatic experience," Bucky added, "and that most adults would be ruined after that, and considering he's just a teenage kid, he's doing amazing."

"That we can't even fathom what it was like for him," Steve put in. "But we can try and sympathise, and help him get through the tough recovery period."

"That it's okay to not be okay," Clint continued. "Someone get a notepad, by the way, start jotting this down. This is good stuff."

Vision's mechanical voice spoke up. "I have already been logging our conversation into my system, and can recall any one of your points instantaneously."

*Good to see I didn't build him for nothing.* The superbots was becoming more and more intuitive by the day, performing tasks that were well outside the initial algorithms Tony and Bruce had programmed within him, and the rate of Vision's cognitive development surprised even Tony sometimes. And it *was* incredibly handy.

"Basically, we're telling the kid that we've noticed he's not fine, even though he keeps stating that he is," Tony announced. "But *much* more gently, eloquently, calmly. Remember, if we go too far too quickly, he'll shut down and start feeding us some bullshit about wanting to verse Rhodey in another round of Uno. Speaking of," he added, noticing for the first time that the man in question was missing (wow, Tony was an extremely shitty friend), "where is the guy?"

"He went out with Sam, Pepper and Bruce to restock the Med Bay supplies," Steve explained. "They'll be gone for the rest of the day, probably, along with Thor, who's spending some time with Jane, so looks like we'll be talking to Peter on our own when he wakes up."

“Well, if there’s a plus to that,” Clint muttered, “it also looks like the rest of us will actually be getting fed tonight, then, instead of just eating the dude’s scraps.”

Tony seriously doubted this; food was absolutely the last thing on his mind, and he didn’t think he could even hold down a coffee in his current state of agitation. He knew he should be practically dead on his feet with sleep deprivation - Peter’s nightmares had ensured that he’d never fully earned back all those hours of sleep lost during those dark nights he’d spent shut away in his workshop, searching desperately for the HYDRA base that had captured the kid - but he felt wide awake, limbs shaking, heart thumping as though he was running on six shots of caffeine instead of zero. The urge to act was overwhelming. He wanted to burst into Peter’s room, shake the kid awake and fix everything with a snap of his fingers.

Unfortunately, things were never that simple.

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When Peter awoke, Tony wasn’t beside him, which was odd in itself, because the man usually made a point of always being there when Peter woke up.

That was why the small flare of anxiety in the pit of his stomach was completely justifiable. It was weird that Tony wasn’t here, and the worry definitely wasn’t some sort of late on-set of separation anxiety.

Heh, yeah, keep telling yourself that. Afraid to be alone now too?

Pathetic.

Weak, pathetic, worthless.

His definitely-not-separation anxiety was soon calmed when Tony walked through the door, looking hesitantly over his shoulder, and instantly re-sparking Peter’s worry. *Tony Stark* did not *hesitate* .

“Hey, Pete. Have a nice nap?”

“Y-yeah,” he stuttered, suddenly very aware of the fact that Tony had just witnessed him literally fall to pieces. His mind still felt fractured, like there were cracks running along the surface and threatening to break at any moment, but his two-hour nap had managed to weld some of those pieces together. There weren’t dead bodies piling up around him anymore, but the hooks were still there, tugging gently at his skin. He could ignore them... for now, but he wasn’t sure how long that would last.

Peter wasn’t sure what would happen if he broke again, or if the hooks managed to tug him under for a second time.

“Yeah? That’s good, because I want to talk to you about something.”

“You, uh, you do?”

“Well, actually, *we* do,” Tony answered, stepping aside from the doorway to reveal a crowd of anxious Avengers, peering in at him, and suddenly Peter felt like an animal at a zoo. They filed in

one by one, and he pushed himself up in the bed, folding his legs up against his chest, using them like a barrier against the half-concerned, half-determined stares of the group.

He felt like they'd planned this, like they'd talked about this while he slept. The organised manner in which they walked in, none of the usual bickering and laughter echoing through the air, made him bristle. What were they playing at?

"Peter," Steve began, and the boy jerked his suspicious eyes from Tony's face to the Captain's. The man's eyes were cold steel, and his square jaw was firmly set. For a second, just a second, those light blue eyes were replaced by almost-black ones, and there was a fist coming towards his face at lightning speed that he was powerless to stop, and Peter stiffened, but then he shook his head, mentally crumpling the image up and throwing it away. This was Steve, Captain America. He wouldn't hurt him.

He doesn't need to hurt you, you're falling apart all by yourself. Weak, pathetic, worthless.

"What's this about?" Peter asked, making eye contact with every determined gaze in the room. He found no answers to his many questions, but worry and exasperation were carved into all of their faces, weaved through the grooves on their skin. He knew, logically at least, that they would never hurt him, but there was still a sense of foreboding in the air. Peter noticed that not everyone was present in the room; Sam was missing, and so were Bruce, Thor and Rhodey. He knew that Bruce liked to spend a lot of time alone, in the Med bay or in his lab, and that Thor was probably with Jane and Rhodey was likely doing something Airforce-related, but he had no idea where Sam was. The Avengers seemed to have formed one huge team against him, and Sam was part of their team, wasn't he?

"We're worried about you, kiddo," Tony said, stepping away from the wall he'd been leaning against and moving to stand beside Steve. A united front, one big wall of adults who, apparently, were not swallowing his bullshit.

This was not going to end well, and his body was itching to escape the steely stares of the Avengers. He felt trapped, and his natural fight or flight instinct, only strengthened and moulded to become even more paranoid from his time with HYDRA, was *screaming* at him, but he chose to ignore it for now.

This is why bad things happen to you. Can't even listen to your own instincts!

"You went through a lot, маленький паук, and most of us can't even begin to fathom what it was like for you," Natasha said, and Peter would be lying if he said the deadly calm lacing the woman's voice didn't scare him. To be fair, Natasha always scared him, at least a little bit, but this was different. She was in mission-mode, a single purpose in mind, and inches away from slipping into the Black Widow persona.

What scared him more, though, was the way Clint picked up where she left off, finishing her sentence seamlessly. The two super-spies had always seemed to be in sync in a way no normal pair of humans could ever be, their movements always echoing the other's, especially on missions, and their thoughts seemed to run on a frequency only the two of them had access to - but this time was different. It seemed... rehearsed, like a show, and Peter felt like an audience member who had come late, missed the first half of the plot and the introduction of all the characters, and then took two bathroom breaks during the remaining parts of the movie.

That was to say, he was very, very confused.

That's not new, though, is it? You're not even useful enough to keep track of what's going on half

the time.

“But you’re obviously not fine, squirt, and that’s okay. We need you to know that it’s okay to not be okay,” Clint said, following on perfectly from where Natasha trailed off.

Peter felt like screaming, and the hooks were digging deeper into his skin, pulling him towards the dark, scrambled sea of his memories with more vigour than ever before. It took all his energy to strain against them, and the bodies were piling up around him again. He raked a shaking hand through his hair, staring at the group with confusion.

And then, just like that, the confusion was morphing into annoyance. He was *frustrated*. Life was confusing enough as an ex-teenage-HYDRA-assassin who lived with the Avengers; he didn’t need the aforementioned Avengers acting like the cast of a well-practiced Broadway musical on top of all that.

“I repeat my earlier question... *what is this about ?*”

“You have been stating that you ‘are fine’, when it is clear that you are not ‘fine,” Vision said, and Peter startled. He hadn’t noticed the Android - or Wanda, who was standing next to him - from where they were positioned behind the other four. Now that he was paying more attention to the figures behind the main four, he could see Bucky hovering behind Steve, eyes full of a deep, compassionate understanding that made his skin crawl.

Everyone shot Vision a dirty look, and Peter heard Wanda mutter, in a quiet voice that she evidently believed he wouldn’t be able to hear (thank you, super senses), “Vis, we talked about this, remember? Let *them* do the talking. You’re here for emotional support,” under her breath. So he had been right; this *was* planned.

“As that walking pile of scraps *so eloquently* put it, you’re not okay, Peter, and you need to stop saying you are,” Tony said with a pointed eye roll in Vision’s direction.

“But I am fine! Why don’t you believe me?” *Probably because you don’t even believe yourself*. “Why won’t you trust me when I tell you I feel *fine* ?”

“Peter...” Steve said, and the pity in his eyes was what did it.

Peter snapped.

“What! What is it, *Captain* ?” Peter sneered, staggering to his feet. He swayed dangerously for a second, and everyone jerked into action, hands stretching out to help him before he had a chance to steady himself, which only succeeded in angering him even more. “Stop it! Stop treating me like a little kid. I’ve done more shit than anyone else here. *I am not a child !*”

“But you *are*, kiddo.” The name that usually made Peter feel all warm and fuzzy inside did nothing to calm him down this time. Instead, it added to the fire burning under his skin. “We’re just trying to help you!” Tony said placatingly. Why are you being so difficult about this?”

“Did you ever ask me if I *need* your help?” *I do, I really do. Please. Don’t listen to me*. “Because I don’t. I didn’t need it before and I sure as hell don’t need it now. I’ve always coped by myself, and it isn’t any different now!”

You aren’t fucking coping now, the voice in the back of his mind murmured dangerously, and he lost his grip on reality for a moment, the hooks pulling him just a little closer to the disarrayed memories. One moment his handler was standing in front of him, a whip in his hands and a smile coated with bad intentions on his face, the next he was staring into the perturbed faces of the

Avengers.

“You don’t have to cope by yourself now, that’s what we’ve been trying to tell you. We’re here for you,” Natasha said, her voice steady and annoyingly devoid of anything other than the dangerous calm from before.

Peter hated the way his own voice shook with emotion when he responded. “I don’t need you.” *Yes I do. I need you, please. Don’t listen to me, don’t go.*

Where had all his HYDRA training gone? Where was the familiar mask of uncaring that he used to be able to slip into with ease? It was gone, because he hadn’t felt the need to use it in so long. He was weak. The Avengers had made him weak.

Weak, pathetic, worthless .

He watched as Tony’s face fell, crumpling like Mousy’s legs had when the boy had taken a bullet for Peter. For a stranger.

He watched as Steve’s jaw clenched and his forehead creased, hardening like the bad Winter Soldier’s had when their fists had come down upon his face again and again.

He watched as Clint frowned and crossed his arms over his chest, looking like he was both trying to hold himself together and deflect any more of the harsh words Peter may fling their way.

He watched as Wanda flinched and Vision reached out to hold her, seeking comfort that he had only just learned was something he liked.

He watched as Natasha shut down completely, emotion sliding off her face and shoulders stiffening. She was slipping into the Black Widow, closing herself off from the world, because the world *hurt* . Hadn’t he done that very same thing thousands of times before as a way to protect himself from the horrors of his existence?

He’d hurt them. His words were a weapon, capable of doing more harm than any physical thing ever could, and shouldn’t he know that, better than anyone?

Forbidden words floated into his mind, unasked, an unwanted ghost. What good were ghosts if they didn’t haunt you?

Forbidden words that had hurt him, words that had wiped him clean, like cleaning off a whiteboard. Words that had taken away *Peter* , moulded him into something else, something dangerous, and stuffed him back into the husk of his own body all wrong, twisted. He was a stranger in his own mind when those words were used.

“I don’t need you to pretend to be my family.” *I need a family. I need you guys to be my family. Don’t leave, please don’t.*

Звезда - star in english. It had become the first word that HYDRA had used against him. His first mission, the first time he’d been outside his base since he could remember, had been during the night, and he’d asked his handler what the pretty, bright lights in the sky were. The question had earned him a day in solitary - *questions weren’t allowed* - but before the door had shut and he’d been encased in darkness, his handler had hissed, “they’re stars, something you’ll never see again.” Peter had cried when he saw them for the second time, on his eleventh mission. He’d truly thought his handler would carry through on his threat. That had been before he learned that every foul word uttered by his handler was a poisonous lie.

“I don’t need you to tell me that I’m not good enough to cope by myself.” *I know, I know I’m not*

good enough. Weak, pathetic, worthless.

Красный - or, red. It was the second of nine words that spelt out the machine HYDRA wanted him to be. Red was the colour of HYDRA's crest, and the colour of the blood they spilled to achieve their goals - the blood that they had made Peter spill to achieve their goals. Red was allegiance, red was the colour of his cheek after it was slapped for disobedience, red was in his ledger, bright and permanent.

"I don't need you to try and heal me, or whatever it is you're trying to do." Please, someone heal me, because I can't do it by myself. I'm broken, so broken. I'm tired of being broken.

Синий - blue. The colour of frozen limbs and oxygen-starved lips. The colour of the scrubs that the scientists wore when they cut him open and turned him inside out. Prodded him and poked him until he felt less human, and more packaged good.

"I don't need your pity, or your concern. I don't need it." Is feeling like a shattered window pane a reason for concern?

Надежда - hope. The first time Peter discovered it, he had been just a boy, alone on the streets of an unknown city, with a mission that needed to be completed in the next four hours if he wanted food anytime soon. He'd gotten distracted though, by a woman with kind words and a soft face, hands that caressed instead of harmed. She'd taken him in, given him a bowl of warm soup... and then a team of HYDRA agents had streamed in and shot her in the head, at point blank range. Her body appeared in the ever-growing pile building in his peripheral vision. Hope was not a necessary thing, and it was not rewarded. He had learnt that early on.

"I don't need you tiptoeing around me like I'm a vase teetering on the edge of a table. I'm not inches away from smashing into a million pieces!" Yes I am, I'm about to break. Please, help me, I'm about to shatter.

Восход - sunrise, and if Peter had thought stars were pretty, they paled in comparison to a sunrise. He remembered watching in awe as the sun crested a hill silhouetted against the bright sky, the first sunrise he'd ever seen. The first rays of light brushed the land, and Peter breathed in. His breath left him again in a rush of wonderment when he watched as the sky painted itself before his very eyes. Oranges and reds splashed across a willing canvas, fading into light pinks and musky purples. Sunrises reminded him of hope, but, unlike hope, they weren't a waste of time.

"I don't need you to keep asking me if I'm fine." We all already know the answer. I'm not, I'm not fine.

Три - three was the number of partners that Peter had had. Each one had died, and each one had been his fault. The first hadn't been clear of the blast radius from a bomb, rigged by Peter himself. He had found her corpse, mangled and torn, her platinum blonde hair the only recognisable feature, and even then, it had been soaked with crimson blood. The second hadn't lasted more than a week, and he was the one that haunted Peter the most. The boy with the golden hair and blue eyes - he realised now that he had looked like a miniature version of Steve - that had tried to escape the HYDRA base as soon as the opportunity had presented itself. He hadn't been successful, and Peter had been ordered to terminate him, because the boy was a traitor. *So are you, traitor, traitor, traitor!* The third had been another boy, quiet and reserved, dark hair and even darker eyes, like coal. The shadows that flickered behind them, dancing with trauma and turmoil, spoke of horrors that were commonplace in the grey concrete halls that had made up Peter's home at HYDRA. The boy had put a bullet through his own brain a year after Peter met him, and he hadn't done anything to stop it, though he had plenty of time to act. Maybe it was the pain that he could see on the other boy's face, pain that begged for a way out, or maybe it was because Peter wanted to pick up the

gun after the boy was done with it and follow him out. It didn't matter, because he hadn't, and after that he hadn't had any more partners. He worked alone.

"I don't need you to rock me to sleep and tell me everything will be okay!" *I do, I need someone to tell me that and mean it because I can't do it myself. I'm too weak. Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

Одинокий - lonely, and he had been, oh so lonely. His partners, while not exactly talkative or cheery, had been a presence that he'd needed on his darkest days, and on his brighter ones too, because even those had been all too gloomy. When the last boy had gone - to a better place, hopefully, though any place would be considered 'better' than the base where he lived - and HYDRA had deemed him cursed, marking him down as *solo work only*, he had been so, so alone. The darkness of his cell, big enough for two but housing only one, had seemed darker, the chill of the concrete walls sinking deeper into his bones, the very emptiness suffocating.. He was lonely, and the hollow ache of it in his chest returned with a pang occasionally, even now, when he was almost never alone.

"I don't need you to hang around because you feel obligated to. I'm not a charity case!" *You must have better things to do. You're the Avengers, and I'm weak, pathetic, worthless.*

Соблюдать - compliance had been the first rule he'd been taught. It was woven into his lessons, hammered in during his punishments, it spilled over into every act in his life. Comply, or die. Comply, or be terminated. Do not betray HYDRA. Do not betray us. Betray us, and die. Betray us, and be terminated. A rule that he had lived by for years and years, until he hadn't. Until he'd broken free.

"I don't need you telling me what I feel, because I know, I know what I feel, but it's none of your *fucking business.*" *Tell me what I'm feeling, tell me what this mess is supposed to be. Someone tell me what I'm supposed to do, because I feel like there are people playing tug of war inside my mind and I'm the rope. I don't know what to do, and I don't know what's happening.*

Шестнадцать - sixteen, the age he would either accomplish his greatest goal, or die. His sixteenth birthday was the day that HYDRA had been preparing him for all his life. When he was sixteen, he was supposed to terminate the Avengers, or die trying. It had been his ultimate mission, his ultimate goal in life, his reason for being. Now, he would rather die than pick up a weapon against them. He would rather die than add their lives to the tally of those he had taken. He would rather die than see their bodies on the pile collecting in his peripheral vision.

"I don't need your fucking help," he hissed, and the venomous tone was undermined by the tears streaming down his cheeks. *I need your help so fucking much, but if I ask, I'm weak, and if I'm weak, HYDRA will be able to take me back again, or worse, you'll kick me out. Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

Who would want someone like me?

He didn't notice how his breath heaved in and out of his chest, or the way his legs shook dangerously. He didn't notice his vision tipping to the side, or the alarmed cries of the others, who had been standing in shocked silence until now. All he could see was the pile of corpses that had finished culminating in the corner of his eye and had moved into the center of his line of sight. Faces, pale and still, blank and cold, stared back at him. Too many faces, there were too many faces.

Peter stopped fighting against the hooks, and they dragged him down the last few inches that he'd managed to keep between himself and the chaotic ocean of memories that lapped at his ankles, threatening and angry. He was submerged, and faces were whirling into his vision, before sliding

away faster than he could properly see them. He felt like he was in a washing machine, tumbling and twirling, sense of direction skewed; right is left, up is down, Peter was...

Lost. Thoughts were missing and he was unknown.

Everything was unknown.

Unmade.

He was gone.

He was...

weak, pathetic, worthless.

~~~

The kid had passed out.

He had actually, fully passed out.

Whilst trying to get Peter to admit that he wasn't fine, in a move that had turned out more like the confrontational intervention Vision had first suggested, rather than anything even remotely comforting or sympathetic - in an attempt to get Peter to open up, they'd somehow ended up shutting him down completely.

*Literally.*

Peter was out cold.

*Only you would try to initiate a hugs-and-kisses-fest and end up knocking a kid out. Great planning, Stark.*

If he was being honest, Tony was still in complete shock. Peter's rant had shaken him to the core, truly rattled him, right down to his very bones, and Tony was not a man easily rattled. The words had unnerved him. They had stung. They had *hurt*.

It didn't matter whether they were true. It didn't matter if they were merely another defence mechanism concocted by Peter to combat the Avengers' pressing questions, or the most authentic words Peter had ever spoken in his life. It didn't matter, because this had been *Tony's* idea and it was *Tony* who had come up with this and it was *Tony* who had formed a plan that had pushed the kid to the breaking point and it was *Tony* that had caused him to actually pass out from the stress.

It was Tony, as always.

Tony's fault.

Why the fuck couldn't he seem to get a single thing right with this kid?

Why the fuck was he so damn *incapable*?

It was probably lucky that Bruce, Sam, Rhodey and Pepper chose that exact moment to return from

their shopping trip, because the rest of the Avengers didn't seem to be physically capable of movement. They stood there, paralysed, shocked into speechlessness, staring at the now-unconscious Peter without moving a muscle. The harsh echoes of the kid's haunting cries still seemed to be ringing in the room.

*I don't need your fucking help.*

*I don't need you to keep asking if I'm fine.*

*I don't need you to pretend to be my family.*

That one, Tony mused numbly, had potentially stung the most.

"...guys? Guys? *Guys*? What the hell is going on in here, what's wrong with Peter?"

Tony jumped, the world snapping into focus as he became suddenly aware of movement around him, voices. Bruce had entered the room with a box of fresh meds in his arms, apparently with the intent of refreshing Peter's dosage, and now stopped dead, his face greying drastically.

The sight of Bruce's obvious concern, not even remotely concealed and displayed so openly on his voice, was enough to jolt Tony back into action.

"Kid - Peter - passed out - unconscious," he said dumbly, the words jumbling and distorted as they struggled to escape past the numb lump that had constricted his entire throat. He still didn't know what to feel. He was numb. He was in shock.

"Passed out?" Bruce repeated. "Why? Did you walk him around too much, or something? Is he over-exerted?"

"Over-exerted - yeah," Tony said mechanically. "Not from walking, though."

Bruce stared at him, eyes wide and uncomprehending.

"Then why the hell did he pass out, Tony?"

*Say it. Get it over with. No point denying it, Stark.*

Tony took a deep breath and said aloud what they'd all been thinking, the accusation that had been echoing around the room, unspoken yet bearing down on all of them.

"Because we confronted him."

~~~

A confrontation. That was what it had been. Tony could see that, now, though it made little difference. The damage had already been well and truly done.

Have you noticed you only ever seem to notice your big fat mistakes after they've been made and subsequently turn everything into a pile of dogshit? Bit of an issue you've got there.

It had been well intentioned. Their hearts had been in the right place. It was the *thought* that counted, right?

Wrong. It didn't matter if they'd tried to be nice, if they'd kept their cool initially, if they'd spoken passively instead of aggressively, if they'd made themselves as un-threatening as it was possible to be. It didn't change the fact that Tony had willingly allowed seven fully grown adults to confront a

still-recovering Peter, who had barely escaped the hellish clutches of HYDRA a bit over a week ago, and essentially demand the kid to change his coping strategies. No matter how nicely they put it, it didn't change what they'd set out to do.

Tony had done a lot of fucked up things in his life, but this one just about topped the list.

Bruce was furious with disapproval, of course. According to him, it would be a major setback to Peter's recovery. Since they'd essentially evoked such high levels of stress in him, levels high enough to make him pass out, Peter had lost a lot of energy, both physically and mentally. Bruce spent the afternoon monitoring the kid closely, making sure his blood sugar didn't drop too low and that his heart rate remained stable, but Tony could tell it wasn't life-threatening - Bruce only had one or two creases on his forehead, compared to the typical dozen that would be added if the situation was critical. (Tony still shuddered remembering how wrinkled the doctor's forehead had been on that day when Peter's heart had - *no*. He refused to think about that day ever again.) The bigger question, of course, was whether Peter would ever trust them again. In an attempt to open the kid up, they'd left him more closed off than ever.

Could the damage be reversed?

Had Tony fucked up just one time too many?

Even worse to deal with than Bruce was Sam, who was far less concerned about Peter's blood sugar levels and far more astounded at the team's general lack of judgement in the mental health department.

"Even you, Nat?" he repeated incredulously, after the team had explained (in varying states of mumbling remorse) what they'd done. "How could you possibly think that was a good idea?"

"Look, it wasn't like we *planned* it as some massive confrontation," Natasha explained. "We were going to be nice, calm, soothing, relaxed - we *were* - he just... he took it the wrong way."

"Of *course* he took it the wrong way, you essentially told a traumatised kid that the one strategy he'd been using to deal with said trauma wasn't good enough and that he'd have to find another one," Sam told them exasperatedly. "Honestly, you guys, haven't we all been there ourselves? Something's too tough to deal with, too hard to think about, so we file it away, pretend it never happened, just so that we can cope and get on with our lives."

Of course Tony had been there. He'd been there more times than he could count. These days, it felt like he was *constantly* there, like he never got a chance to leave. And it sucked. He hadn't wanted Peter to fall into the same trap; he'd thought he could save the kid before being sucked in by the blackhole completely. But, once again, his attempt at helping the kid had completely backfired, and now everything was a hundred times worse than what it would have been if Tony had just taken one extra second to *think things through*.

"It's the classic repression technique," Sam continued. "You see it all the time with soldiers, manifesting in all different ways. It's unhealthy - you can't ever fully recover while you're in that stage - but it goes away eventually. With *time*," he added vehemently. "Not with forced conversations, not when you guys want him to. It could take weeks, months even, but it'll never get better if you actively try to stamp it out of him. You've gotta give him time, be supportive, but let him take the wheel - don't make the moves for him, let him show you what he's comfortable with, let him do the steering, and support him with every step of the way."

"You make it sound so easy," Tony muttered. "Not all of us have the patience to watch grass grow."

“It’ll be tough, at first, I know,” Sam agreed. “Hell, it’s tough for *me*, seeing the kid like this. But trust me, I’ve seen this type of case a hundred times before. I see it in you every day, Tony.”

Tony groaned, ignoring the fact that Sam was entirely right and instead choosing to deflect the observation with his usual sarcasm. “Please, do not turn this shrink session on me, Wilson. Just tell us how to help the kid.”

Sam hesitated, choosing his words carefully.

“Slowly,” he said eventually. “You’ve gotta take baby steps. Don’t stress him out, one thing at a time. Don’t overwhelm him - for example, don’t take seven of you and talk to him about his issues all at once.” He rolled his eyes, glancing at each of them pointedly. “With this type of thing, environment is everything, surroundings are key. Kid’s in a calm setting, he’s gonna feel calm, right? If the kid’s surrounded by chaos, he’s gonna feel panicked and unsafe. The trick is to keep him calm, make him feel secure. Then he’ll talk.”

Tony ran this information over in his mind, drinking in Sam’s words. It made sense. It made a hell of a lot of sense. The problem was, it seemed damn near impossible. Make Peter feel calm, when he himself was one panic attack away from crumbling to pieces? Keep Peter safe, when he was doubting whether the kid would ever trust him again?

He couldn’t do it. He just couldn’t. He had never felt more hopeless, more useless, not even when he’d been stuck in that godforsaken HYDRA mask, watching as the kid was waterboarded past the point that any normal human could survive. That memory would haunt him forever, but at least he’d had a way out, then. A plan. He’d just had to wait for the right moment. Now, he didn’t even know what the moment was.

Tony Stark, for the first time in his life, was completely and entirely lost.

Maybe that was why the suggestion came tumbling out so fast.

“Sam, you could talk to him.”

~~~

Peter knew the heartbeat of every person that meant something to him, and he knew that the heartbeat thudding steadily next to him was not Tony’s.

He couldn’t say he was surprised - he’d behaved like an animal, feral and vicious - of course the man wouldn’t want to be around him. He had to admit, though, it hurt. Tony was always there when he woke up, or not far away, but Peter couldn’t hear the man’s heartbeat at all, not even a muted, softened version, which meant he was either in the lower levels of the Tower or somewhere else entirely.

But the heartbeat that *was* there, calm and strong, was almost as soothing as Tony’s. He cracked his eyes open, ignoring the pounding in his head in order to peek through his lashes at the figure at his bedside, making sure it was actually who he thought it was. Sam stared back at him, looking rather unimpressed, and Peter, being the intelligent person he was, knew he was about to get a therapy session to end all therapy sessions. He supposed that was to be expected, seeing as he’d exploded like Mount Vesuvius all over the Avengers and then collapsed dramatically. That was certainly a tried and true way to end an argument - he winced as that particular memory came back

to him. How embarrassing. How *weak, pathetic, worthless* .

“You know, for a super duper assassin, you kinda suck at pretending to be asleep,” Sam said, his eyebrows raised high on his forehead, Peter was almost worried that they would fly right off.

“Doubt you could do any better,” he grumbled in response, pushing himself up in bed and wincing as his head gave a particularly painful throb.

Sam noticed the movement and offered a glass of water, which Peter gratefully accepted. “You scared the shit out of the others when you went down, man. When Bruce, Pepper and I got back they were in shock, Tony looked like he was about to cry, and can I just say-”

“I know, I know. I shouldn’t have yelled. They were just trying to help and it’s all my fault.” *It’s always your fault.*

“Actually, no, it’s not your fault. It’s never good to confront someone who’s hurting, and your response, while it may not feel like it now, was justified. Some good came out of it too, because now you’ve gotten some pretty hefty shit off your chest, I’d say.”

“But - but I yelled at them,” Peter said, his brows drawing together in confusion. Sam was saying he was... right? Justified? *Justice isn’t something you deserve.*

“And *they* yelled at *you* . I’m going to guess that you’re not holding any grudges against them?” Sam asked, and he didn’t need Peter to reply to get his answer. “That’s what I thought. They aren’t mad at you, Pete. In fact, the only reason they aren’t here right now is because Bruce got mad at them for over-exerting you, and they ran away - I think they went to the park. People are scared of the Hulk, but an angry Bruce Banner is who they should really watch out for.”

Peter giggled a little at the mental image of a dishevelled, human-sized Bruce chasing down a terrified crowd of Avengers. Sam had been right when he said that his breakdown had at least helped him to get something off his chest. He felt lighter than he had in days, and the hooks weren’t tugging him so relentlessly towards the deep. He wasn’t free of them, but they had loosened, if only slightly.

Sam chuckled along with him, before sobering. “Listen, Spider-Dude, I’m going to be straight with you; though the method they used to talk to you was questionable, they had a point. You’ve gotta stop telling everyone you’re fine. We’re not idiots, Peter, we can see that you’re struggling.”

“I-I’m not.” *I am. I really am. But... maybe I deserve to be helped?*

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

*Or not.*

“Peter...” Sam sighed, and the boy could hear the sadness in the man’s voice. He knew that Sam just wanted to help, knew that Sam was qualified to help, but he couldn’t say the words. He couldn’t say ‘I need help’, because he didn’t need people to know that he was too weak to help himself.

*Weak, pathetic, worthless.*

“I don’t need your pity, Sam.”

“And I’m not offering it, but I do know what kind of line your thoughts are going down. I’ve been there myself, and I’d bet Tony’s entire fortune on the fact that every single Avenger has, at one point, had the same kind of mindset - even Tony himself - but there’s a reason they don’t have it

anymore. It's toxic, it's destructive, and if you let it, it will rip you apart from the inside out."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Peter mumbled into his lap, but even he could hear how fake he sounded. In fact, Sam's words, with their gentle quality and knowing undertone, had weaved through his defences gracefully, burrowing right into his heart and, he realised, they almost perfectly described what was happening inside him. There was toxicity in his mind, full of biting words and dark thoughts, and it was tearing him apart. But... maybe he wasn't weak for feeling that way? Maybe needing help wasn't as shameful as he'd been led to believe?

If he was certain of one thing in the world, it was that the Avengers weren't weak. They were strong, The Earth's Mightiest Defenders, and *they* had needed help to be okay again, all of them. If the Avengers weren't weak for needing help, maybe Peter wasn't weak for needing it either?

He took a breath, and his eyes flicked up to meet Sam's. The man was sitting on an armchair next to Peter's bed, one leg crossed over the other and his hands folded in his lap. His dark brown eyes, warm and patient - oh so different to the dull chill of his handler's eyes, of the bad Winter Soldier's eyes - looked at him carefully, allowing him time to form the words that he needed to say.

"Sam?" Peter asked, his voice small in the silence.

"Yeah, little dude?"

"I-I'm not fine."

~~~

"How's Peter?"

"Good."

The automatic reply had slipped out of his mouth before he was even aware of conjuring it. It truly was depressing, how little control Tony had over his own goddamn mouth. Luckily for him, he wasn't speaking in front of the United Nations panel, or some similarly important board of important people today, but just Pepper.

"I mean, no, no, he's not," he rushed to say, upon seeing Pepper's bemused expression. "Don't mind that stupid 'good' reflex. I blame social constructs and the expectation of societal norms."

Pepper raised an eyebrow at him. "I see you've been spending your days locked in the Med Bay with Pete well, then. Finally decided to refresh your vocabulary?"

Tony shrugged. "Well, I do have you to compete with, and when it comes to you, a man can never be too prepared."

Pepper laughed a little, and the sound carried away with the wind, flowing over Tony's balcony and down onto the streets of Manhattan below. "It sounds like you're trying to dazzle me with your new philosophical concepts. Too bad for you, I already studied philosophy in uni."

Tony glanced at her, momentarily shocked. "You? Philosophy? I never thought I'd hear those words in the same sentence, Pep."

"And I never thought I'd hear you try to write off a massive and outright lie with the expectation

of societal norms, but here we are.”

Tony sighed, knowing full well that she wouldn't be distracted. He stared out at the orange sun on the horizon, making the tops of the New York City skyline glow with burnt daylight. “Truth is, Pep, I'm kind of tired. Exhausted, actually. Haven't slept properly for weeks.” It felt good to admit it to someone; he'd been carefully concealing his sleep deprivation from everyone, most especially Peter, because if there was one thing he didn't need, it was to add another bullet point to the kid's unnecessarily overloaded list of *Things to Feel Guilty About*.

“And let me guess, this new bout of insomnia is because of Peter?” Pepper asked, watching him carefully.

Tony nodded slowly. Somehow, Pepper managed to make it sound less accusatory, so that he could actually admit the cause of his lack of sleep *without* feeling like he was condemning Peter. How she managed this, he didn't know.

“I'm just...I'm - uh, I dunno, Pep - I'm worried about him.” Damn, the lack of sleep really was getting to him. He could barely string two words together. “He kinda went off his head earlier - totally justified, of course, since I somehow thought it would be a good idea to take half the team and confront him about the whole ‘I'm-fine’ thing-”

“Yeah, Rhodey was telling me the story,” Pepper nodded knowingly. “I would scold you, but I can tell Sam's already done that, not to mention you'll be beating yourself up about this for months to come.”

There was no point even bothering to deny it.

“Well, maybe I have reason to,” Tony said defensively, screwing his face up in frustration. “I just - *argh*, Pep, I don't even know what I was thinking - how could I be such a damn idiot-”

“Tony, the fact that you *were* such a damn idiot is proof enough that you were just trying to look out for him,” Pepper reassured him. “You don't go to lengths like that, even if they are somewhat ill-informed, for people you don't care about.”

“Whether I care about him or not is beside the point,” Tony argued, conveniently forgetting to point out that that wasn't even a question, because he cared about Peter way too fucking much and he'd known it ever since the heart monitor had fallen silent-

Nope. Not thinking about that.

“Caring about him isn't enough to save him from - from this - this *shit*,” Tony continued angrily. “It's killing me, Pep, seeing him hurt like this, seeing him trying to hide it, and not being able to do a single goddamn thing about it. And the one thing I did try and do backfired so horrendously that it's a wonder if the kid will ever speak to me again-”

“Now *that* is melodramatic,” Pepper told him calmly. “Quit the theatrics and think for a second, Tony. Do you really think that Peter is going to cut you off? *You*, the only person who's able to calm him down from his panic attacks, who gets up night after night to help him with his nightmares? *You*, who spent days in the Med Bay practically glued to Peter's hip because you were so worried about him? Peter needs you, Tony, you always make him feel safe. He's not ignoring you anytime soon, I can assure you.”

Tony sighed, running a hand through his hair in agitation. “I know, I know, it's just...” He trailed off, unsure of what he was even trying to say. He'd run out of arguments. The fear was irrational,

but it was still there, lingering and overbearing, and he didn't know how to get rid of it.

"I'm scared, Pepper," he admitted finally, and it felt like an enormous weight had been lifted off his shoulders as he said it out loud for the first time.

"I know," Pepper murmured. "I know, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. You can use it. Use your fear to help him, Tony, instead of isolating yourself because you're scared to face him. You made a mistake, yes, and Peter got mad, yes. But now you have a chance to fix it. Sam will help you guys out, help you deal with the fallout. You can make this work."

The glowing orange sun was tinged with pastel pink, now, and Tony looked out at the rows of skyscrapers in the distance, considering Pepper's words. He was still terrified, still doubtful, still completely disgusted with himself, still unsure if he was ever going to get his kid back - but there was something else there, now, too, something that only Pepper could have evoked from him. He couldn't place a name on it, not yet, but it was *something*. And for now, that would be enough.

Enough to keep him going.

Enough to face Peter.

And enough to maybe, just maybe, eventually get his kid back, once and for all.

And this time, Tony wouldn't lose him again.

Chapter End Notes

And that's that! We strongly recommend a pick-me-up for ya'll after that, because we know it was intense, but we hope in the best way possible.

Feel free to leave kudos or comment, it makes our day :)

Take Two On That Outing

Chapter Notes

Peeks out from behind hands

Heyyyyy guys.

So, we had assessments and that's the reason this took so long, but I know you're probably keen to read this chapter (we made it a long one) so I'll keep it short.

Really sorry guys, enjoy!

P.S. I hope everyone is doing ok right now, whether you're in quarantine, self-isolating or mostly unaffected. Stay safe ya'll!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Therapy was kind of shitty.

But also kind of not.

Peter didn't like the way Sam seemed to know what he was thinking, what he was feeling. He didn't like the way Sam was supportive, and attentive, and totally non-judgmental because he was *weak, pathetic, worthless*.

He didn't deserve to get help from someone like Sam.

Nevertheless, talking to the guy was helping... sort of.

He had coping mechanisms now, instead of winging it and hoping for the best whenever something went sideways.

Sam told him that he needed to work on changing the soul-crushing mantra in his head. Sam told him that *weak, pathetic, worthless* could be changed to *strong, capable, priceless*.

And Peter was *trying*. But it was hard.

Every second of every day his brain told him that he was *weak*, that he was *pathetic*, that he was *worthless*.

Every minute of every day, one of the Avengers told him that he was strong, that he was capable, that he was priceless. That he needed to believe them.

And Peter was trying. But emotions had never really been his strong suit. HYDRA seemed to have missed the whole 'teaching kids how to deal with their feelings is important' memo, because they'd certainly never done it for Peter. Could he assemble, handle and fire a gun by the age of five? Yes. Could he process and work through his trauma by the age of fifteen? Well, the jury was still out on that one.

Sam also told him that he needed to tell someone when the hooks started tugging at him, because telling people stuff was apparently the number one solution to all of his problems.

Sam told him that he needed to tone down on the sass and sarcasm.

Peter told Sam that he didn't choose the sass life, the sass life chose him.

Sam had chuckled, and then told Peter that deflection was a common strategy used by a lot of people, and it was one of the first things he'd been trained to recognise.

So yeah, therapy was kind of shitty.

But also kind of not.

~~~

Apparently, Peter was progressing. Apparently, he was getting better.

It didn't feel like it, because the hooks were still there, incessant and sharp in their tugging. His nightmares still screwed up his sleep cycle - which totally sucked, by the way. He was exhausted, and it made him grouchy to the extreme - and sometimes followed him into the day, where shadows climbed up the walls and stretched into horrifyingly familiar, yet grotesquely distorted faces.

It didn't feel like he was getting better, but Sam said it never did.

Apparently recovery involved a lot of small improvements that were almost unnoticeable.

Like when Peter had walked into the kitchen with the intention to pour himself a bowl of cereal (and steadfastly ignore the fact that it was five in the evening), only to find Steve chopping up onions. With a knife. A really big knife. According to Sam, the fifteen minute long panic attack which had followed that discovery was an improvement, because he'd been able to pull himself out of it five minutes faster than last time.

Sam said he needed to work on the way he talked about himself during their therapy sessions. "You're very negative when it comes to how you view yourself, Pete. We've got to work on that."

Peter liked how Sam always said 'we' when he was talking about working on Peter's... issues. It was probably, like, the first thing that Sam had learnt in therapy school, or wherever people went to become shrinks, but it reminded him that he had a whole team (literally) of people behind him. And those people all understood at least some part of whatever was going on with him, because they'd experienced it themselves.

But Peter couldn't just change his mental image of himself: *weak, pathetic, worthless*. Sam said the key was consistency and repetition. He needed to learn to catch himself when he was thinking like that, and he needed to be able to correct that train of thought, turn it into something more positive.

Peter wasn't great at it, evident by the fact that they had barely started one of their therapy sessions and Sam had already told him off at least five times for talking shit about himself.

And then he went and did it again. "I don't know why it happened, Sam. Maybe I'm just a fucking idiot who-"

"Peter," Sam interrupted, "I can see that telling you off for using negative words in association to yourself isn't working, so we're going to try a different strategy. I found this tool that people can use to recognise when they're using negative language," Sam said, rising from the armchair he'd draped himself in and moving around to his desk.

Most of their therapy sessions were done in Sam's 'office'. It was a little room off to the side of

Sam's bedroom, and the man used it to fill out any counselling-related paperwork from his side job. He may have been an Avenger, but that didn't mean he was going to entirely ditch his previous job. He was just more of a paperwork guy now, due to the fact that the place he'd worked at was in D.C., and he was currently in New York.

Peter was intrigued, although a little nervous to see what Sam had in store for him. The guy had a steady, calming personality, but he was prone to doing the weirdest things, so really, anything was on the table.

Peter thought he was prepared for anything, but when Sam stood up from where he'd been rummaging through one of the drawers of his desk, Peter couldn't hold back the half shocked, half amused snort.

"Sam..."

"Yes, Peter?" the man grinned innocently, but the spark of mischief in his eyes and the neon orange object in his hands gave him away.

"Sam, is that a Nerf gun?"

"Yep!"

"Are you going to shoot me with that Nerf gun? In this a professional setting?"

"That depends on you," he said calmly, settling himself back into his armchair. "Now, what were you saying?"

"Uh, well, I can't even go downstairs to Tony's lab by myself, because, uh, I'm pathetic and it's such a stupidly small thing-" Suddenly, a foam dart hit Peter's leg. It was harmless enough that his spidey sense didn't go off, but it certainly got his attention. "Hey!"

Sam merely looked at Peter placidly, and raised a single eyebrow. Peter really needed to learn how to do that - it was such a power move.

"I mean, uh, I find it hard to go to Tony's lab without someone with me, because I-I went through something traumatic alone, I guess, and Tony's lab has a lot of... pointy stuff that kind of scares me, so I feel safer when-when there's someone else there."

"Good, Peter, this is a good step. See, this is how we speak positively about ourselves and our issues."

"But it's... *hard*. There are so many little things that terrify me now, and it's stupid-" another dart flew through the air, hitting him squarely in the chest. "Seriously?"

"Positive, remember?"

"Fine, uh, there are little things that scare me now, and it frustrates me because I wasn't scared of them *before*, and it's just one more reminder of the fact that I'm not... *normal* - and don't shoot me, because it's true. I can stick to walls."

Sam chuckled, before sobering. "Hey, it's alright to be scared of the little things. Everyone's scared of something - I know for a fact that Steve is uncomfortable in crowds, and I hate geese."

"Geese?"

"Yeah, I had a bad experience when I was younger and I can never look at the bastards in the same

way.”

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Forty minutes later, when Natasha knocked on the door to tell them that lunch was ready, the floor of Sam’s office was littered with little foam darts.

“What’s going on here? Why are there Nerf gun bullets everywhere?”

Sam’s face was serious, but there was a smug little smile on his face as he answered, “Cognitive behavioural therapy tools.”

“Alright then... I’m just going to, uh, yeah,” Natasha said slowly, trying to make a judgement of the situation before giving up and backing out of the room.

It was only when he was seated at the dining table with a chicken, lettuce and mayo sandwich in front of him did Peter realise that the Nerf gun hadn’t triggered him in any way during the session.

Huh, small improvements indeed.

~~~

Peter hadn’t seen Tony very much in the last few days since *the incident* (where almost the entire Avengers team - minus the sensible ones - had confronted him in his room and, essentially, called him out on his bullshit). While *the incident* itself hadn’t exactly been pleasant, they’d jerked him out of his funk, and it had been the push he’d needed to ask for help, so he wasn’t even remotely mad at them.

Nevertheless, everyone that was there, including Tony, had apologised profusely, and had then impulsively bought him an unreasonable amount of chocolate. Not that Peter was complaining, but he didn’t want them to think that they needed to treat him differently because they’d upset the poor little baby... whoops. Negative thought. He just didn’t want to be treated differently because of this new batch of trauma that had come his way.

Rhodey had explained to him that Ross was ‘barking up Tony’s ass’ about the accords, and the media weren’t far behind. Apparently, when a panicked God of Thunder burst into a press conference, muttered something about a missing boy and HYDRA, it concerned people. And yes, Peter had watched the footage of the failed press conference almost as soon as he had access to the internet and was coherent enough to do so - it had been, and still was, trending on YouTube; he was bound to find it at some point.

So yeah, Tony was busy, and Peter completely understood that, but he *missed* the man. His absence was an aching hole in his chest that only dulled when he was around the other Avengers. Sam said it was because he’d formed a close relationship with Tony, had come to use him as a support, and so the sudden loss of that support was bound to shake his foundations.

The only time he really got to see the man was at night, when Tony would wake him up from the slowly decreasing number of nightmares, and sit with him, reading *Harry Potter*, sometimes until the sun breached the horizon and the city below started kicking into gear for the day. He had a vague memory from when he’d been temporarily incarcerated, of wishing to be lying next to Tony, listening to his voice as he read the ending of *The Goblet Of Fire* out loud.

He had to say, he almost wished that he’d never found out the ending.

Cedric had *died*, Voldemort was *back*, and Mad Eye Moody *wasn’t* Mad Eye Moody. Damn,

Harry Potter's life was almost as crazy as his own.

They were onto *The Order Of The Phoenix* now, and Peter hadn't been aware that it was possible to hate anyone more than Voldemort, but then Umbridge had shown up, and he had been proven wrong. In the eloquent words of Tony Stark, "Umbridge is a hoe."

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Twenty-One Questions was a chaotic game. Peter knew this because he'd once played it on Omegle with a random dude from the Netherlands.

Twenty-One Questions with the Avengers (minus Tony, he'd been holed up in his office for the whole day), however, was a whole other level of chaos. He was genuinely starting to wonder if their brains were wired differently, because there was *no way* that any normal person would come up with some of the questions and answers that they had.

The version that the Avengers had was slightly different, due to the fact that there were so many players, and *no one could stick to the rules*. First, they had to play a speed-round of Uno (a normal game except with only five cards instead of seven); the winner then asked the first question. They could ask an individual, and that person would have to answer truthfully and then be able to ask the next question to whoever they wanted afterwards. Alternatively, they could ask the whole group in which case, everyone would have to answer the question, and then the person with the best answer (decided by the person who asked the question), would ask the next question.

Bucky won the game of Uno, which wasn't surprising given that he'd had years of spy and assassin training from HYDRA - deduction and observation were some of the first skills that had been taught. Either Peter, Natasha, or Bucky always won, although Clint occasionally slipped into first place if he was at the top of his game.

"Alright, my first question is for Sam," Bucky said slyly. He and Sam had a weird relationship that Peter couldn't quite figure out. They acted like friends most of the time, but occasionally their playful bickering would turn into snaps and jabs that dug a little deeper than anything friendly was supposed to. Were they friends? Enemies? Frenemies? Peter couldn't tell.

"Oh, great," Sam grumbled, rolling his eyes.

"Lets say, you cooked yourself some chicken, but it wasn't cooked properly-"

"Excuse me! I always cook my chicken properly. Always. It's a point of honour for me, just ask Peter."

"It's true, Buck. He gave me a twenty minute lecture on the importance of cooking chicken perfectly when he started to teach me how to make food." Peter ignored the little thought that niggled at the back of his mind, telling him that he hadn't had one of those cooking lessons since he got back from his temporary incarceration because every time he saw a knife he had a panic attack of epic proportions, and there was a surplus of knives in the Avengers' kitchen. He was pretty sure that at least half of them actually belonged to Natasha, and she'd put them there for a reason known only to her.

"Back to the question," Bucky intoned, looking pointedly at Sam to silence him. "Anyway, say your chicken was cooked weirdly, like radioactive weirdly-"

"Where are you going with this, Bucky?" Sam asked, looking at the other man like he was shitting a deck of cards.

“Shush, let him finish, I want to see where this goes,” Steve hushed, waving a dismissive hand at Sam.

“So it’s like, radioactive chicken, and you eat it, and it gives you superpowers, cause you don’t have any, Sam-”

“Oh, you son of a b-”

“What superpower would you have?”

“Seriously, you’re asking me a superpower question? You’re literally a super-soldier, your super-soldier buddy is sitting right next to you, the kid can climb up walls and there’s a dude over there who looks like he’s a second away from turning into his giant, green counterpart...” Sam trailed off, lancing at Bruce, who was calmly reading a book.

“It’s true, I’m getting very frustrated listening to this conversation,” Bruce replied, looking the opposite of frustrated as he continued to read.

“We all are,” Natasha said, sending a glare Sam’s way.

“Fine, fine, I just think it’s stupid because we’re *all* superheroes, but whatever. Uh, I’d want the power to change probability.”

“That’s kind of boring, don’t you think?” Wanda queried, tilting her head, causing the messy bun on top of her head to flop sideways a little.

“No way, you could do absolutely anything with it. Like, in a battle, what’s the probability that your opponent will trip over and eat concrete? Like, a solid fifteen percent, maybe more, maybe less depending on the day, right? What if I could just change that to one-hundred percent? Or what if a building was about to fall down with fifty people still inside? I could just change the probability of that happening to zero percent, we could evacuate everyone, and boom, problem solved. I could also... use it for more, uh, selfish reasons, like being able to outrun Captain America. So yeah, best superpower ever. Hands down.”

“That’s actually a surprisingly good answer,” Bucky said, looking contemplative.

“It is, isn’t it. I’m asking Vision a question now. It’s something I’ve always wondered.”

“What is it, Sam?” the android questioned.

“Can you bathe? Cause, you’re electric right - Tony said that you were basically a glorified toaster.”

“No, I do not need to bathe. Instead, I go to the car wash fortnightly, and they give me a swift wash.”

“Really?”

“Of course not. I do not need to bathe, Sam.”

“Oh snap, Sam just got roasted by an android,” Peter muttered, and Natasha silently stretched a bowl of popcorn out to him. He had no idea where or when she got it, but he was used to her procuring random objects from seemingly nowhere by now, so he grabbed a handful and turned his eyes back to the conversation happening in front of him.

“But *could* you bathe, if you wanted to?”

“I do not want to.”

“But *could* you?”

"I have not tried it, but I do not see why not. I am naturally water-proof and fine in the rain."

"Huh, alright then. Your turn to ask someone a question."

"I have a group question, actually: did you all like the stew that I made for you last night?" Vision asked, his voice genuine and innocent. Everyone collectively winced, because while Vision was the newest student that had come under Sam's tutelage, he was still terrible, even with the man's guidance. The soup in question had been... horrible. Peter didn't know how, but it had been salty, sweet, bitter *and* spicy all at once.

"I've gotta be honest, right? It sucked dude," Clint said, frowning apologetically.

"Sorry, Vis, but I've gotta agree with Clint on this one," Wanda confessed, wrapping an arm around the android's shoulders.

"The second best bird-themed superhero is right, for once."

"It... wasn't great."

"The stew on Asgard is much better."

"I'm sorry, but I'd rather die than eat it again."

"Even the MRE's they give out in the army are better than that."

"A homeless person with no other option for a meal would rather starve."

"I'm really, really sorry, Vision, but it was horrible. Stew shouldn't be four of the five tastes - you only missed umami, and that was the one taste that it *should've* been."

As each Avenger went around and expressed their versions of 'it sucked, dude', Peter noticed the android's face falling more and more. He suspected that Vision had already had an inkling of just how bad his stew had been (probably because no one took more than two bites of the entire meal), but it always hurt more to have it displayed right out in front of you, so Peter took mercy on the poor guy. "I liked it Vis - much better than the food they serve at HYDRA."

The android smiled gently. "Thank you, Peter. You have the best answer and according to the rules, it is now your turn."

There were cries of dissent from the rest of the Avengers. Apparently because Peter had 'lied' (he preferred the term, 'omitting the truth'), he should be disqualified - answers had to be truthful, and whatnot.

"Rules are made to be broken," he said defensively.

"They were made to be followed. Nothing is made to be broken," Steve replied - the fool. Little did the man know that Peter had recently binge-watched every single episode of Brooklyn Nine-Nine, and there was a scene that had prepared him for this exact conversation.

"Uh, that's where you're wrong, my foolish friend; pinatas."

Natasha perked up. She was the one who had introduced the show to Peter, and she recognised the scene immediately. "Glow sticks," she chimed in, and Peter grinned at the 'please kill me' face that Steve pulled.

"Karate boards."

"Spaghetti when you have a small pot."

“Very true, Nat, fist bump,” Peter snickered, offering his fist. She returned the gesture with a smile of her own.

“You’re funny, little spider.”

“Thanks, it’s the trauma,” Peter shot back, and after a few seconds of shocked silence, everyone burst into raucous laughter. He could have sworn he heard Natasha actually *snort*, and Clint definitely choked on either air or his own saliva.

“Alright, alright, just ask the question, Peter,” Steve wheezed, clutching his stomach and taking a deep breath.

“Uh, what’s highschool like? My only references are *Harry Potter*, *High School Musical*, and *Mean Girls*, and I genuinely don’t know whether I should trust them.”

“Why do you wanna know about high school, squirt?” Clint asked, and the mood in the room sobered substantially.

“Well, I’ve kind of been thinking about, like, maybe, going? That’s what normal kids do, right? And I just want to be normal.”

“Does Tony know about this?” Steve asked.

“Not exactly, I’ve only started thinking about it recently and I haven’t seen him around much.”

“Well...” Bruce said slowly, closing his book and sitting up straighter, “I’m not sure if *anyone* here has had a normal high school experience, to be honest. I know Tony and I both skipped several grades, Wanda, well, war torn country, experimentation, enough said, Vision obviously didn’t go to school, Steve and Bucky were literally educated a century ago, Thor, well, also enough said, and Natasha was trained from a very young age, just like you. She didn’t exactly have a normal childhood, let alone school experience. I’m not sure about Clint, Rhodey or Sam, though, maybe they can help?”

“No dice from me squirt,” Clint chimed in immediately. “I ran away from home and was part of a travelling circus for most of my childhood.”

“Wait, seriously?” Peter said. That sounded like a story straight off of BuzzFeed Unsolved or something.

“Not kidding, where do you think I got my skills from?”

“I dunno, I thought you just took a couple of archery classes or something.”

“*Archery classes!?* ”

“Hey, settle down bird-man,” Rhodey said, thankfully coming to Peter’s rescue. He’d been scared that he was about to be beaten up by an angry circus-man. “I was raised in a rural area, kid. There was one school, and it had fifty kids in it, not exactly your modern day high school.”

“Are you telling me that I’m the *only* person in this room who’s had a normal highschool experience?” Sam asked, shaking his head. “This is batshit crazy, I’m hanging out with a bunch of wackos,” he mumbled under his breath. “Alright, listen up, shortstuff. Highschool does not have magic - no potions class, no charms class, no defence against the dark arts. Instead you’ve got your sciences: biology, chemistry, physics and whatnot. Maths, english, religion if you go to a religious school, history, which should probably be renamed *American* history, geography, which should also probably be renamed *American* geography. I couldn’t tell you where in England, London is to save my life, but I can name every single state in the country.”

Sam talked about high school for hours, and the others added in little tidbits of information when they could.

Peter listened intently as they spoke about lockers and textbooks, bullies and friendship cliques. Apparently, people didn't spontaneously burst into perfectly choreographed song and dance, which he found very disappointing. Not only had *High School Musical* lied to him, but he felt like that would have been very entertaining to watch.

Eventually, Sam got tired of talking and put on the most normal high school movie that he could find. To be honest, Peter thought it was kind of boring, but boring meant no one was being kidnapped, or killed or tortured or inconvenienced in any kind of way, and that was always a good thing. Boring was normal and normal was good.

Soon enough, the low voices of the people on the screen lulled Peter into a light sleep. His nightmares were slowly decreasing in number and intensity, but they were still pretty hardcore and frequent, which meant he was almost always tired.

He had no idea how long he dozed for, but at some point he heard Tony's familiar voice, and the happiness that bloomed in his chest startled him a little. But it also made sense; he'd really missed the man.

"Is he asleep?"

"Yeah, he asked about high school. Said he was thinking about wanting to go," Sam said.

Snitch, Peter thought.

"High school, jeez. I mean, if it's what he wants, I have no qualms. Certainly isn't a financial issue, and he's probably at college level, intellectually, so him being behind wouldn't be a problem either. What do you think, Sam? Would he be alright, like, emotionally and mentally?"

"There are thousands of ways you could have phrased that question, and you go with that one?"

"*Sorry*, but what do you think?"

A heavy sigh. "I think... he's not there just yet. Maybe we should wait until the new school year starts, whenever that is, instead of thrusting him in mid semester. We'll see how he is around then, but first he'll need to actually leave the Tower."

"Right, yeah, leave the Tower. Thanks for hanging out with him lately, guys. Ross is a pain in my ass, and I swear I'm five seconds away from holding a repulsor to his head and threatening to shoot if he doesn't shut the fuck up. This whole Accords thing is a mess," Tony sighed, and Peter can picture him loosening his tie and stretching out his no-doubt stiff back. "Anyway, gotta get the spider-baby to bed. Night."

A chorus of "night, Tony!" sounded, and then a much quieter round of "goodnight, Peter," followed afterwards.

Then, there were warm, strong arms around him, and the familiar smell of motor oil that never quite left Tony's skin, despite how much cologne he put on to try and cover it, and Peter finally fell asleep, dreaming of singing wizards and dancing circus nerds.

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Thaddeus Ross.

What an unfortunately tragic name.

He might have sympathised, if the guy wasn't such a *complete and utter dickhead*.

Seriously, if Tony had to endure one more 420-p quality video call with nothing but the guy's receding hairline and awful, *awful* goatee to stare at, he thought he might just lose it. Maybe he already had. It wouldn't surprise him. He'd woken up last night from a bad dream, and he could have *sworn* it had primarily been made up of a dozen identical Rosses, each one as asshole-like as the next, marching towards him and threatening to shave off his facial hair entirely. It had been deeply disturbing and ever-so-slightly emasculating, and he'd had to watch ten episodes of *Friends* over five bowls of popcorn just to calm down enough to fall back asleep. (Which he never got the chance to experience, because one of Peter's nightmares had demanded his attention soon after. They finally appeared to be slowing down, much to his sleep-deprived relief, but he was sure that it'd be months before they fully disappeared.)

So, yeah. Ross was a total pain in the ass. The issue was, Tony couldn't seem to escape the guy.

Every morning he'd get a call, demanding an urgent response to the Accords proposal, an immediate agreement or declinement from the Avengers. Every morning, Tony would explain, with no small degree of exasperation, that it was more complicated than that, that they were dealing with a traumatised kid who'd just been captured and brutally tortured by a secret evil cult of sadistic Nazi-supporting freaks, that they couldn't fully agree to the Accords because of said sadistic Nazi-supporting freaks and the threat that they continued to pose, that the last time they'd gone public about this, the entire UN panel had seen it erupt into chaos soon after, that they were now being heavily scrutinised by the media because of said eruption of chaos. Oh yeah, and Tony hadn't had the chance to sit down and properly talk to Peter in days, and Ross's pathetic excuse for a moustache was really distracting and his elephant-like wrinkles gave him a headache and he could have sworn that every day, his eyes were forced to endure an extra inch of his unappealing forehead and Tony was so *sick and tired of the Accords*. Seriously, why did politics even exist? Why did formalities even matter? It was so much easier to just do whatever the fuck you wanted, paying off whatever damage you caused with the bursting-at-the-seams bank account you owned. He'd lived that life for over twenty years, and it had been *excellent*. He felt it had really built his moral character.

Unfortunately, the tragic concepts of *responsibility* and *diplomacy* had been introduced to him, or rather, forcibly burdened upon him by Pepper, and now he found himself here, in his current predicament, deprived of Peter and overloaded with a prematurely aging old man. Ross was like a prune, he decided. All shrivelled up and wrinkled. Giving off the illusion of sweetness, but turning out to be entirely too nauseating to even begin to digest.

*Comparing Ross to a dried fruit now, huh? You've really lost it.*

On top of that, he'd learned from Sam that Peter had now decided he wanted to go to school. And this wasn't necessarily a *bad* thing. A kid willing to socialise, learn and be educated among people his age was a drastic improvement from a kid who shut himself in his room and barely spoke more than a handful of words to anyone. That had been Peter when Tony had first found him, and since then, he'd gotten exponentially better. If Tony ever managed to find even an ounce of a sentimental tendency within himself, he'd write a speech about it.

The problem was, school was the last thing on Tony's mind right now. If he didn't sort something out, the whole Accords debacle would probably cause his wrinkles to start appearing even more prematurely than Ross's. And not to mention, Sam the shrink himself had said that Peter wasn't

ready. Tony was more than willing to let the kid go to school, but only after a healthy amount of time had passed. If the kid started pushing for more immediate action, well...to be honest, Tony would have no clue how to respond. Turning down a request from Peter was even more impossible than Tony remembering what he ate for breakfast. The kid was too damn *persuasive*. (And yes, he couldn't deny it - adorable.)

Tony sighed. Sleep. He really needed sleep. With any luck, Peter would make it through the night free of nightmares, and if the kid slept well, then Tony might finally have a chance of doing the same. He was still feeling immensely guilty about essentially ditching the kid over the last week, but persistent, stubborn assholes had a tendency of being persistent, stubborn and asshole-like, and unfortunately Tony had been gifted with the misfortune of dealing with the biggest, most persistent, stubborn asshole he'd ever met - and that included himself, which was really saying something.

He collapsed onto his bed, not even bothering to get into some pyjamas, and closed his eyes. The sooner he dealt with the Accords shit, the sooner he'd never have to look at Ross's face ever again. And then he could spend some time with Peter, and maybe feel just the slightest bit human again.

He fell asleep within seconds. Peter's dreams remained peaceful, and so did Tony's.

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Tony hadn't thought that the Accords situation could become any more intolerable.

The next morning, however, he soon discovered that he'd been painfully incorrect.

"I have given your team more than enough leeway," Ross was saying. "If you haven't come to a decision in the generous amounts of time the UN has allowed - much more time than I think is entirely necessary, if I may add-"

No, you may not add, you shrunken dickhead. He had to bite down on his tongue to prevent the words escaping his mouth.

"-then I think we can all agree that the Avengers simply can't be trusted at all. The Sokovia Accords are a matter of trust, Mr Stark. It's a two-way street. And without your team cooperating, I'm afraid mine can't either."

"I'm sorry, are we living the same timelines here? We *tried* to cooperate, Ross. We scheduled a press conference, for God's sake, and believe me, it doesn't get much more cooperative than that, I personally find press conferences to be undignifying and altogether dehumanising-"

"I'm not interested in the issue of your own ego, Mr Stark," Ross interrupted. "What I am interested in is the cooperation of the Avengers in relation to the Accords in a *timely manner*, and so far, you've done nothing but deflect my questions and retaliate with crudely designed insults over several cups of coffee."

"Okay, but both insults and coffee are necessary, it's a natural coping mechanism for poor stressed-out billionaires like myself-"

"There's no more negotiation, Stark," Ross cut in. "The UN is putting their foot down. We've scheduled for you to meet with the panel this Saturday, two o'clock. If you don't show, we will automatically assume you've declined our offer. Political action will follow."

"Hey, whoa, is that a threat?" Tony exclaimed. "Careful, buddy, I don't think you've got enough hairs left on your head to be making threats..."

He trailed off, a stab of annoyance panging through him as he realised that the asshole had already hung up. Clearly, dear young Thaddeus had never been educated in the art of witty comebacks. That hadn't even been one of Tony's best, and the man still felt the need to exit the situation.

Tony sat there for a moment, pleased with himself. For all intents and purposes, Ross had, essentially, forfeited in today's battle of wits. That meant he'd willingly allowed Tony to triumph over him-

"Boss," came FRIDAY's voice, "*if I'm interpreting matters correctly, you now have a meeting scheduled with the UN this Saturday, two o'clock. I've already added it to your calendar. It's exactly two days away.*"

Tony froze for a moment, not comprehending.

Then the comprehension came, and he groaned.

"Shit. FRIDAY, alert the team. We gotta work this out, now."

~~~

"Two days? We're meeting with the whole of the United Nations in *two days*? Tony, I thought you said you had this under control!" Rhodey exclaimed, pacing up and down in front of the team.

"Well, I thought I did too," Tony protested. "I was completely dominating him with my internet speed, stylish outfits and much-less-receding hairline-"

"Tony, *now is not the time*, " Rhodey groaned. "Do you realise how serious this is? In two days, we're meeting with the UN. They'll expect us to have a decision ready, probably speeches of acceptance and god knows what else. May I remind you that there are precisely forty-eight hours in two days? May I point out that a third of that time is spent sleeping? May I draw your attention to the fact that *we can't work this shit out in two-thirds of forty-eight hours!*"

"That's precisely thirty-two hours," Vision added helpfully.

"Look, everyone, let's just calm down," Steve said in that frustratingly controlled way of his, clearly hoping to defuse the situation somewhat. "Clearly, Ross and the UN have cracked down. We should have expected this. Ross is a jerk - this is how jerks act. Now we've gotta find a way to beat the jerk."

Tony reached over and mock-patted him on the arm. "Well said, Cap. Where'd you learn the definition of jerk, by the way - in your copy of *20th Century Pop Culture for Dummies*?"

"My guess is Yahoo," Clint smirked.

"It was the Urban Dictionary, actually," Steve said, rolling his eyes, and both Tony and Clint burst into howls of undignified laughter. The howls were soon cut short by Natasha's fork, however, which she didn't hesitate to flick them both in the face with.

"Concentrate, you morons," she muttered. "Tony, you're the one who called this meeting, so why don't you say something productive for once?"

"Okay. Productive. I can be productive," Tony nodded, clearing his throat and attempting, unsuccessfully, to keep the image of Captain America looking up the definition of a jerk on the Urban Dictionary from his mind. He snorted, coughed, and tried again. "Look, here's what I think. Things have just ramped up a notch - we've been given a deadline, and no one likes deadlines."

“Correction - you don’t like deadlines,” Wanda intervened. “Some of us have no problem sticking to a schedule.”

“Whatever, I stand corrected,” Tony sighed. “The point is, our opinion hasn’t changed. We need to stick to the plan. Let’s just go in there and tell them the terms and conditions we came up with - that yes, we’ll agree, but as long as we’re free to move against HYDRA. We’ll do what they say on the basis that we have a free pass to kick HYDRA’s ass.”

“Except we won’t say it anywhere near as bluntly,” Bruce corrected. “If we want to win them over, we have to act like we’re giving into them. Like they’ve made the conditions, and we’re just bending what we want to fit their requirements.”

Bucky nodded. “Powerful people like being in control. Bruce is right - if we act like it’s the UN enforcing the decision, not us, they’ll be more willing to negotiate.”

Sam hesitated. “Okay, so no offence, dude, but exactly what life experience do you speak from here?”

“HYDRA,” Bucky shrugged.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You - you’re comparing HYDRA to the United Nations?”

“Sure, why not?” Bucky replied casually. “They’re both powerful organisations that command authority. Moral compasses aside, they’re basically one and the same.”

“Minus a few dozen decades of torture and brainwashing for one of them, and yeah, they’re practically twins,” Rhodey drawled. Bucky gave him a pointed look, and he sighed begrudgingly. “Okay, so I guess I do kind of see the logic.”

“I like where this is going, guys, but there’s still one big glaring problem we gotta consider,” Steve said, folding his arms. “What if they don’t agree? What if they refuse to accept our terms? Are we gonna give into them, or go rogue?”

“Ross gave me a half-threat about that this morning,” Tony recalled darkly. “Long story short, if we refuse to cooperate, they’ll order an intervention. We’ll be shut down.”

Clint snorted. “I’d like to see the bastards try.”

“That’s not the point,” Natasha told him. “It’s not a matter of whether we can beat them in a fight-”

“Which we can.”

“-it’s a matter of how the hell we’re going to function normally when we’re considered fugitives of the law and people are actively searching for us to disband the team. The answer is, we can’t. The only feasible outcome in this scenario is that we win over the UN.”

Tony swallowed, running a hand through his hair as he digested Natasha’s words. As much as he hated to admit it, she was right; basically everything was riding on this one meeting, and if they screwed it up, the Avengers would never be the same again. Normally, Tony thrived under high stakes conditions, but when those conditions involved being diplomatic and subtle and *negotiative*, well, it was a whole different ball game, and not one that he had much experience in.

Bruce was apparently thinking along the same lines. “I don’t know, guys, there’s a lot riding on this one meeting,” he said nervously. “Maybe we should write speeches or something. Just to be prepared.”

"I have been recording this entire conversation on my hard drive, if it helps," Vision offered, but Steve shook his head.

"No. No speeches. We need to sound as authentic, as personable and cooperative, as possible. A speech would make the whole thing staged."

Rhodey nodded. "Yeah, Cap's right on this one. We're not gonna win them over by reading off cards."

"We need a clear idea of what we're going to say, though," Wanda pointed out. "Who's going to do most of the talking?"

"Not Tony," Rhodey said immediately. "Sorry, man, but you're just too--"

"Loud? Yeah, so I've heard," Tony broke in, rolling his eyes. "At least once a week."

"Hey, let a man speak the truth," Sam cut in, smirking at Tony.

Ordinarily, Tony might have pushed the matter further, if only to prove Rhodey wrong, but he could feel Natasha getting ready to hit him with the fork again and he'd rather avoid a second bruise to his forehead, given a choice. Plus, he supposed he had to admit that Rhodey... might be right. Just a little.

"I could speak," Thor offered.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Okay, if I'm not allowed to speak, then you sure as hell aren't either. Hate to break it to you, but blasting the panel with a bolt of lightning isn't going to fix anything."

"I wouldn't need to *blast* them," Thor countered impatiently. "They would be brought down, shaking, to their knees, at the mere *sight* of my mightiness. And then they would see my hammer, and whatever pathetic resistance they managed to summon would crumble entirely. I would have those mortals succumbing to our proposal in *seconds*. "

Sam winced. "Yeah, sorry buddy, but in this case, I don't think straight-up intimidation is the way to go."

"As we established," Clint muttered. "Like, five minutes ago. Seriously, dude, you got amnesia or something?"

"I think it's important that we all speak," Steve interrupted, breaking off the argument before Thor had a chance to retaliate. "It'll show them that the decision isn't false, or forced - all of us agreed to it. Unity looks good when you're trying to convince someone you're right."

"Agreed," Bruce nodded, "but certain people should carry most of the conversation. I volunteer you two," he added, pointing to Natasha and Steve.

"I'll second that," said Rhodey. "I feel like you two would be the least likely to start punching people, at any rate."

"I'm honoured," said Natasha dryly. "But I feel I should warn you, if they even try to *slightly* insinuate that Peter wasn't worth us invading HYDRA because he used to be HYDRA anyway, I *will* tear them to pieces. Actually, if anyone tries to attack Peter, full stop."

Tony nodded darkly. "Wow, Romanov. Looks like you and I can finally agree on something for once." He fell silent, grinding his teeth as he imagined what would happen if the UN tried to blame

Peter. A whole lot of repulsor blasts on his part, most likely. And any chance of them finding some sort of cooperative middle ground would be abandoned immediately.

“Which is why we definitely need to keep Peter out of this as much as possible,” Bucky spoke up. “And me, as well. In fact, I feel like it’d be best if all people with a past involved with HYDRA just stayed at the Tower.”

“That’s literally two people,” Sam said. “You and Peter.”

“I know,” Bucky answered. “As I said.”

“No, man, you made it sound like a whole goddamn list-”

“For dramatic effect.”

“Hey. We’ve already got Tony in the house, I think that’s enough dramatics for us, thank you very much.”

“Alright, settle down,” Steve interrupted. “Point is, Bucky is right. To avoid complications, both Peter and Bucky stay at the Tower. And we try to avoid discussing Peter at the meeting at all costs.”

“Okay, done,” Rhodey agreed. “Does anyone else have any mind-blowing suggestions to add?” He looked at Thor, who had opened his mouth and gestured to his hammer. “No. No hammers, Thor.”

“I think we’re good,” Steve said.

“Well in that case,” Tony decided, “I think we should all have a second round of waffles. I really need a sugar fix.”

~~~

They ate more waffles, with Peter and Pepper joining them (both of whom had been playing Scrabble in Pepper’s quarters while the Avengers held their meeting). Then they resettled in the communal area, and they started practising. Bucky and Pepper impersonated the UN officials, throwing tricky questions at them left, right and centre, and the rest of the team practised answering them in the most diplomatic way possible. They practised delivering their ultimatum in a non-ultimatum-like way; they practised smoothly deflecting questions about Peter and Bucky without making it seem like they were deflecting them at all; they practised keeping cool and remaining calm when the ‘UN officials’ started getting aggressive. (Well, that was more for Tony, Clint and Thor’s benefit. Tony still wasn’t entirely sure he wouldn’t just blast the entire UN panel with his repulsors the moment they even slightly disagreed with the Avengers’ proposition.)

Peter stayed with them while they practised, and he turned out to be surprisingly helpful. He continually notified Tony when the man became aggressive - “Tony, you look like you’re trying to shit rocks right now, be more passive,” offered his advice for how to respond to the difficult Peter questions - “Just play the pity card, say I’ve been deeply traumatised and am basically mute due to shock,” and threw out beneficial suggestions about distraction techniques the Avengers could use if things could too heated and they were overcome with a sudden violent urge - “Nat, just think of Boyle signing his dignity over to his ex-wife, you can’t get less intimidating than that”; “Tony, just imagine Harry trying to get in with Cho Chang, that’s the biggest joke of the century” (here, Tony had to cough loudly to cover up his snort, as he knew full well that Peter was about to be proven spectacularly wrong when they got far enough into *The Order of the Phoenix*).

By the end of the day, they were all exhausted, incapable of coherent speech, and on the verge of

tearing each other's hair out. But they had made progress, and that was what mattered, as Steve pointed out in his valiant conclusive speech to the day's events. The next day, they resolved to lay low and mentally prepare themselves for what was to come on Saturday. This was probably for the best. If Tony had to deal with Pepper telling him to stop looking like he had ADHD and anger management issues combined one more time, he was pretty sure he'd break something, and yes, he was aware of the irony of that thought.

~~~

The night before the meeting, Tony finally got the chance to speak with Peter alone. He'd just showered, and popped his head into Peter's bedroom to discover that the kid was still wide awake.

"What's up, kiddo?" he greeted as he entered, collapsing onto the edge of Peter's bed.

"Your hair," Peter replied, nodding to the top of Tony's head. Tony glanced in the mirror and discovered that his hair, normally pristinely gelled with just the right amount of suave carelessness, was even messier than the kid's unruly curls (which was saying something). He sighed.

"Yeah, two days of practising fake smiles and a lack of constipated features will do that to you. Remind me to return it to its usual dazzling glory tomorrow."

"I'll set an alarm," Peter grinned. "Are you ready for the meeting, by the way?"

"If you mean prepared, mentally? No, not at all. I still can't guarantee I won't blast my dear friend Thaddeus to smithereens the moment I lay eyes on him. It would probably be safer just not to take my suit at all, but given the present situation..." He trailed off, realising that he'd hit a sensitive topic. Peter, unfortunately, had already worked it out.

"You're still worried about HYDRA," the kid realised.

"Well...yeah," Tony shrugged. "They're still out there. We haven't destroyed them completely yet. That makes them a threat."

"I guess, but you *did* basically blow up one of their bases, and that'll be a major setback," Peter pointed out. "C'mon, Tony. Even *I've* stopped worrying about them - almost." He hesitated, almost as if wanting to say something, and then abruptly changed course. "Although I guess that's more to do with Sam's therapy than anything."

"Oh yeah, I've been meaning to ask you about that," Tony said, frowning down at Peter. "How's it going?"

Peter shrugged. "Eh. It's kind of shitty. But also kind of not. He started shooting me with Nerf gun bullets every time I said something negative the other day, so uh, that was a new experience."

"Well, I'll give him points for creativity at least," Tony muttered. He paused, knowing what he should say next, but not quite sure of how to phrase it. (Damn it, he still really had to work on the whole concept of *emotions*.) Exhaling heavily, he glanced at Peter again and went for it. "I dunno, kid. I feel kind of bad. I haven't really been around much lately, or had a chance to talk to you, and with everything you've been through...I dunno. I feel like an asshole, I guess."

There. He'd said it. None too eloquently, of course, but he'd gotten the words out. That was progress, right?

Peter frowned at him. "Hey, hypocrite alert. You're not allowed to feel guilty for things that are out of your control. That's what you're always telling me, remember?"

“Yeah, but this is different-”

He winced as Peter’s hand shot out and flicked him across the forehead. “Nope. Nu-uh. You aren’t allowed to say that, Tony. Ross is the one causing problems - I should know, I’ve heard you complaining about his receding hairline at least once a day. It’s not your fault he’s putting all the pressure on you.”

Tony sighed, once again cursing the powers of Peter’s endearing persuasion. “Points for logic, kid, but I still feel bad. Tell you what, when this whole fiasco is done, I’ll make it up to you. We’ll go out somewhere. We’ll take the whole team with us. It’ll be a fun...outing, I guess you’d call it.”

Peter eyed him wearily. “Oh no. Not another game of laser tag?”

Tony chuckled lightly. “No. No more laser tag. I’m not stupid enough to make that mistake again.” He hesitated, considering something. “Oh, and tell you what. Once we get through the entire *Harry Potter* series - which won’t take too long, considering our current rate - we’ll binge all the movies. You haven’t lived life until you’ve experienced a *Harry Potter* movie marathon.”

“Oh, joy. I can’t wait to see Moaning Myrtle cozying up to Harry on the big screen.”

Tony smirked. “Oh, no, the real treat is the *incredibly realistic* CGI of the first movie. You just wait, you’ll practically be *drooling*. Especially at the Quidditch scenes. Pure perfection.” He blew a kiss into the air for dramatic effect.

Peter grinned. “Is that just a slight bit of sarcasm I detect, Tony?”

“Me? Sarcastic? No, never. You must be dreaming.”

~~~

In the end, Tony couldn’t believe they’d spent forty-eight hours unnecessarily panicking about the meeting.

Sure, it didn’t go perfectly, but it wasn’t a complete disaster. They said what they needed to say. The UN panel listened. They raised some questions, but none that the team hadn’t anticipated. They answered relatively smoothly, and the UN panel listened some more. Some questions were raised about Peter, and the Avengers assured them that proper legal measures would be taken. This satisfied the UN panel, and they continued to listen.

By the end of it, Tony knew they’d won before the decision was even announced. It was written over all of their faces. Some were even nodding in agreement.

As it turned out, their proposition was accepted. The modified Accords were signed. The Avengers were allowed to move against HYDRA, but on one condition: they had three attempts. Three attempts, fully supported and allowed by the UN, to take down the brainwashing slimeballs once and for all. After that, they were out. Any action taken against organisations deemed a threat had to first be approved by the UN. The panel had assured them that unless it was a matter of petty revenge, they’d most likely get the stamp of approval every time. The world needed to be saved by *someone*, after all, and who better to do it than a group of enhanced beings with experience in the area?

They went back to the Tower, relishing in their success and weighing up how easily they’d be able to eliminate HYDRA with only three attempts to do so. As Steve pointed out, even if they did fail, whenever HYDRA next made an active move against them - which wouldn’t take long, no doubt - the panel would probably let them fight HYDRA anyway, and they’d have another chance to

neutralise them for good. They still had time, and options, to work with.

All in all, it had gone better than they could have hoped. Sure, there had been a few times when Tony had had to think about Peter's "Harry and Cho" suggestion to calm himself down, and this worked, mostly due to the fact that the kid's prediction was entirely wrong. But he hadn't gotten to the stage of reaching for his repulsors, and he certainly hadn't blasted any of the UN officials to smithereens. So there was that.

But quite possibly the biggest win of the day?

Ross had been absent - apparently he wasn't considered important enough to attend the meeting. Tony hadn't had to torture his eyes with the image of the guy's prune-like, prematurely ageing features *once*.

And that, he decided, was the real victory of the day's work.

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"Fun fact: the average person walks past a murderer about thirty-six times in their life," Peter whispered to Tony.

The man in question jolted up from the couch, where he'd been peacefully napping until Peter had decided to ruin it with another one of his fun facts. In the past two weeks, he'd been riding the high of the Avengers emerging victorious from the Accords meeting, and that high had resulted in what could be described as a 'fun fact fetish' (named by Clint, and detested by everyone else except Tony).

"That doesn't sound like a very fun fact, kid," Tony groaned, not moving from where his face was smushed into a pillow. *Was that a bit of drool eeking it's way out of the man's mouth?*

Honestly, how did the press think that *this* was one of the most powerful, poised and intimidating men in the world?

"It's fun because they didn't decide to murder *you!*" Peter giggled, before skipping off, ignoring Tony's grumble about "my chances of walking past a murderer are much higher than the average person's, considering I live with four highly trained assassins."

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"Fun fact: tomato sauce was sold in the 1800s as medicine, which means I can, in fact, put it all over everything I eat, and then I'll live to one hundred!"

"No, Peter, please. It's *roast lamb*, you don't put tomato sauce on *roast lamb*," Sam begged, tears in his eyes as he watched Peter squirt the bright red sauce over the perfect roast he'd spent four hours making. Four hours of hard work ruined by that little tomato-sauce loving twerp.

"It's *medicine*, Sam. Do you not want me to live a long and healthy life?"

"Medicine from the 1800s! Do you know what else they used as medicine in the 1800s? Cocaine! Would you like some cocaine?"

“Ok, first, how do you just *know that* off the top of your head? Second, you’ve gotta know that offering a teenager cocaine is a bad idea-”

“Why is Sam offering you cocaine?” Natasha asked as she strolled into the room, mild alarm on her face.

“What? I-I’m not! Peter, Peter - tomato sauce - he started it!” Sam shrieked frustratedly, before giving up entirely. “Ugh, forget this,” he muttered, storming out of the room.

~~~

“Hey, Clint,” Peter muttered as he sidled up to the man, who was munching on a bag of almonds. “Fun fact. Did you know that almonds are relatives of peaches and apricots?”

“Seriously?” the man asked, the endless crunches that were emanating from his mouth halting for a moment.

“As serious as a funeral.”

“I hate your analogies, but I love your fun fact fetish. It’s annoying the shit out of everyone, which means I can get away with practically anything and they won’t get mad at *me*, cause they’re too busy being annoyed at *you* .”

“I’m happy to be of service.”

“But I also hate that particular fun fact, because apricots and I have a hate-hate relationship, so I’m very disappointed to discover that almonds, the love of my life, are related to those pieces of shit. Ugh, it’s like finding out your brother-in-law is a slow walker, which actually happened to me, by the way.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, Clint,” Peter said, edging away as the man continued to ramble.

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“Thor, guess how many teeth snails can have?” Peter said as he raced up to the god, who was busy watching a funny cat video with a hilarious look of intense concentration on his face. Nat had shown them to the god last week and he hadn’t stopped watching them since - it was kind of adorable. Thor was still trying to adjust to a world that was so different from his own, and Peter could relate. He was further ahead on his journey to become a fully functioning member of society, because he was at least familiar with behavioural patterns that were considered at least somewhat acceptable, but it was still nice to have a buddy to explore his new situation with.

“I am not familiar with this... snail. Is it on the list of most dangerous animals that you showed me? That Bear Grylls fellow must be a true warrior, for he has shown much courage in his quest to find and catalogue those creatures.”

“No, a snail is like a lump of slime with a shell on its back. They move really slowly and kind of just live life meal to meal.”

“Do they ruthlessly slay their meals, and then consume their flesh with an insatiable hunger?”

“Uh, no, they just eat plants.”

“Well then why were you so excited about their teeth?”

“Because they have twenty-five thousand!”

Thor’s confused expression did not change, much to Peter’s sadness - he’d been hoping that his big

reveal would be enough to impress the Asgardian (who he was almost-but-not-quite worshipping).
“I’m sorry, is that a lot?”

“Yes! It’s twenty-four thousand, nine-hundred and sixty-eight more than we’ll ever have!”
“There are some animals on my planet that have millions, and they’re made of gold.”

“That’s literally the coolest thing I’ve ever heard. Tell. Me. *Everything* .”

~~~

“Guys, did you know that half of the bank robberies that have ever happened occurred on a Friday?” Peter cried as he ran up to Steve, who was doing sit-ups while Bucky held his feet down.

“Yeah, and I was responsible for the other half,” Bucky muttered.

“What? You’ve robbed banks before?” Peter gasped, practically jiggling with excitement. He’d gotten into crime TV shows (other than Brooklyn Nine-Nine), movies, and documentaries lately, so his mind was running through all the bank robberies he’d heard of, trying to imagine the Bucky he knew - who made awesome coffee in the morning, and sometimes put his hair up in a man bun so he could do face masks with Wanda - breaking into a bank, decked out in a balaclava and black-and-white striped sweater.

“Only on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday - I’m not a basic bitch. How else did you think HYDRA had enough money to operate?”

“I don’t know. I just assumed there was a rich, old, white guy in a maroon bathrobe and his blue striped pajamas somewhere that had lost his wife several years prior and decided to use his wealth to fund the biggest criminal operation in the world because he was bored.”

“You’ve really thought this out, haven’t you, son?” Steve asked, struggling to reign in the confusion in his expression. He obviously wasn’t familiar with the stereotypical evil guy in almost every movie ever.

“I’ve had a lot of free time lately, and Sam said that sometimes you’ve gotta make light of the bad things in order to get past them.”

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“Bruce. Hey, Bruce.”

“Yes, Peter?” the man sighed, looking up from the specimen he was studying under a microscope.

“Fun fact: the theory of evolution is fake,” Peter said with a smirk, watching as the older man’s face cycled through shock, disbelief, and confusion, before finally settling on indignation.

“Peter, years of research has gone into this - it’s a scientifically proven *fact* .”

“Oh yeah, then answer me this. It took millions of years for a monkey to turn into a man, right?”

“Well, I mean it’s a lot more complex than that, but yeah, basically.”

“Monkey’s don’t live that long, *Bruce* . Mike dropped. Checkmate,” Peter declared, miming a mike drop as he stared directly into Bruce’s eyes, seeing the internal struggle behind the lens of his glasses as he tried to figure out whether or not Peter was joking. “Bye, Brucie!”

“No, Peter come back! That’s not how it works!”

Peter almost felt bad when he heard the genuine distress in Bruce's voice, but then he pictured the man's appalled expression, which sent him into a fit of laughter that took him a good five minutes to reign in.

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Peter was *bored* .

He was so, so bored.

That probably had something to do with his fun fact fetish. Researching and then sharing those facts gave him something to do other than sit and stare aimlessly out the window.

He'd already watched all the movies that interested him in FRIDAY's database, spent so much time in the gym that he knew each corner like the back of his hand (including the one spider that had made its home in one of the corners of the high ceiling - he was so bored that he'd named her Penelope and created an entire complex life backstory for her, involving several traumatic failed web-making attempts that had proven seriously detrimental to her identity as a spider), manufactured countless cartridges of web fluid for his shooters in Tony's lab, enough to last him a year, or a few months in the event of an apocalypse, and made sure the education HYDRA had given him was enough to get him into sophomore year at high school (it turned out, it was more than enough, and Peter was so far ahead that he could probably go to any university of his choosing. It helped that he was also, in Tony's words, "a child genius" but he didn't want to go to university at the age of fifteen - soon, as in seven months, to be sixteen - because that was definitely not normal, and after everything that had happened, all he wanted was normal). He'd done everything there was to do in a billion dollar tower that stretched almost as tall as some of the morning low-lying clouds, apart from annoy its occupants, so when all else failed, that's what he had turned to.

Honestly, he should've known it wouldn't last. Should've known that the Avengers were more perceptive than he gave them credit for. Should have known that they'd pick up on the fact that he had a serious case of cabin fever.

"Alright, kiddo, due to our fantastic detective skills, the others and I have been able to deduce that you're bored. Very bored," Tony said to him one night while they were stretched out on his bed reading *The Order of the Phoenix* .

"Are you sure FRIDAY didn't just tell you? I've been complaining to her a lot and I think it's annoying her."

"She's not the only one you're annoying, but yes, she did tell me, and then she showed me the footage of you talking to that spider in the gym for three hours."

"I was creating a backstory for her!"

"And that somehow makes it better?"

"Ok, fine. I'm bored. It's just that I've been stuck in here for *weeks* . I get that you're worried about my safety and my, uh mental state, but I'm starting to feel like Rapunzel, dude."

"Clint literally gave you a haircut yesterday. You know for a chaotic mess that normally shouldn't ever be trusted with scissors, that man does a fine job," Tony said, running a hand through Peter's freshly trimmed locks.

"That's because he had to go undercover as a hair and makeup artist on a film set for one of his

SHIELD missions. But you're deflecting, you know what I mean! I'm trapped in a tower, bored out of my mind, with no knowledge of my past... this analogy is getting a little too real for me. I'm backing out."

"Ok, ok, kid, I get your point. You didn't even really need to convince me. I was already devising an outing for you after I finished watching you talk to a spider *for three hours*. I mean, I promised you one ages ago, during the middle of the Accords fiasco, but the spider-talking just *sealed the deal*. You need a breath of fresh air, kid, and fast."

"I'm going to ignore that blatant insinuation that my mental state is anything other than stable, and instead say *thank you*. I'm getting so sick of breathing my own carbon dioxide."

"Yeah, well I talked to Sam too, and he said that you're almost definitely ready for an outing of some kind, although I don't know how much that decision was influenced by the fact that you put tomato sauce on lamb and then ate it in front of him. However, he did say that it'd probably be a good idea to make it a group outing. Might make you, and everyone else, feel a little safer."

"Cool! Going out with the gang, love it."

"I pray that you never say that again. Also, just to forewarn you so you don't get your hopes up, this won't be an extravagant ordeal. We'll probably just take a walk around Central Park or something."

"Do I look like I care? It's *outside*, I'm so ready!"

Tony chuckled. "Alright Spider-Kid, settle down. We've gotta finish reading these so that we can binge the movies."

~~~

"Can we go yet? Are we going? Are we ready to go now? How about now? Soon? You promised we'd go soon," Peter bugged, poking Tony as he did so. Was he aware of the fact that he was behaving like a petulant two-year-old? Yes, but he was so close to getting out of the Tower, and he could barely contain his excitement.

"Cool it on the questions, kid. I've gotta find you a jumper, and a jacket, and a scarf too, probably. Definitely a hat." Tony continued to mutter a list of cold weather garments under his breath as he dug through Peter's closet.

"Ya know, Tony, maybe if you didn't insist on buying me so many clothes, we'd have more success in actually finding the ones I need," Peter said slyly, inspecting his nails as he leaned against the wall.

"Can it, Pete."

They were supposed to have left for Central Park half an hour ago, but when Peter had entered the common room dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, the Avengers had all shouted in alarm.

"What are you doing? Глупый маленький мальчик, it's freezing out there!" Nat had cried, grabbing his arm and Tony's as she dragged them back to Peter's room. "Does he have any winter clothes?" she had added, turning to Tony.

"Yeah, they'll be in here somewhere," Tony had replied, gesturing to Peter's chaotic mess of a closet.

"Good. Find them," she ordered, pushing the two of them into Peter's room and marching away.

“She’s got a point, Pete. It’s early February, so it’s cold out there, currently forty-two point eight degrees fahrenheit, if my super cool, super techy watch has anything to say about it.”

“Please. Your watch is basically a glorified Apple watch.”

“That is honestly the rudest thing you’ve ever said to me. I am so offended right now.”

“You’ll get over it, drama queen. Now can we hurry up and find a coat or something? I wanna go!”

They’d finally found Peter’s stash of winter clothing, and Tony had stuffed him into a thick, woollen jumper and a coat, as well as an awful multi-coloured beanie with an overly large pom-pom on top. Peter had drawn the line at the Iron Man scarf that Tony had tried to strangle him with in his attempt to get it around his neck - there was no way he’d be caught dead wearing that, and considering HYDRA was still very much after him, there was a possibility that the outfit he was wearing would in fact, be the one he was caught dead in.

So maybe he was being dramatic. Or maybe, he thought as he piled into the nicest minivan he’d ever seen (it was the only car big enough to hold all the Avengers) and squeezed between Tony and Sam, he was being realistic, and the very second he left the private, underground parking garage of the Tower, he and everyone else in the car with him would be blown to smithereens.

“Hey, Peter, are you alright? Looking a little pale there,” Sam whispered, twisting his arm awkwardly so that he could rest his hand on Peter’s shoulder. Even with all the extra space that the van provided, it was still a tight fit.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” he said quickly, sounding not at all convinced, and it looked like Sam wasn’t either, if the sceptical look he gave Peter was anything to go by. “Okay, okay. Maybe I’m a little less than fine. I just - what if HYDRA finds us? What if they take me and then kill all of you so that you don’t come and rescue me again? Maybe this is a bad idea, maybe we should just go back inside.”

‘Kiddo, that’s not gonna happen, no way,’ Tony cut in, wrapping an arm around Peter’s shoulders. “You think we’re gonna let some wacky, evil organisation with an enhanced octopus as their logo take you away? That’s not going to happen, not again. Everyone here can promise that.”

Peter looked around to see the rest of the Avengers nodding in agreement, nothing but solemn confidence painting their features - confidence in their ability to protect not only themselves, but Peter too.

“We’ve got you, Peter,” Sam said with a small smile. Peter felt his racing heart slow, and he drew in a shaky breath.

“Yeah. You’ve got me.”

By the time they pulled up to Central Park, Peter’s panic had all but subsided. He was shaking in his seat, all the energy that had built up over the past two weeks raring to be released as they all piled out.

The cold air stung his cheeks and pinched his nose, wind buffeting his body as it whipped between the maze of skyscrapers. *Boy am I glad that Natasha made me layer up*, he thought grudgingly as he pulled his hat down lower over his ears and flipped the collar of his coat up. *It’s so cold, is this normal? I don’t think it’s normal*.

The van’s door slammed shut and Peter turned to face Central Park, his breath catching in his

throat as he took the view in, though he wasn't sure whether it was from the cold or the beauty of the scene before him.

Snow layered the ground and the clusters of trees, practically untouched thanks to the fact that the cold weather was keeping all but the most avid park-goers inside. Weak sunlight shone through the branches, and Peter had to squint at places where it reflected off the snow and straight into his eyes. The sun may have cast light on scenes like that, but sometimes it could be a real pain.

They started meandering aimlessly down a path, hands stuffed into their pockets and chins tucked into their chests to avoid the chill. Peter could feel the restless energy that had been plaguing him for weeks start to dissipate, and he took in a breath of fresh, non-filtered air, relishing in the tingle that the cold brought to his nose.

About twenty minutes in, they found a guy selling hot chocolate from a cart, and Tony bought them all a cup.

Peter cradled the white, styrofoam cup like it was his lifeline, the warmth leaching into his stiff fingers, the sudden change in temperature making them feel too hot all of a sudden, but he didn't mind, pressing his now-warm hands to his face.

They slipped quietly for a few minutes, and Peter wandered a few metres away from the group towards a frozen-over lake. Everything was quiet, peaceful, until an indignant squawk broke the icy silence.

“*Clint!* I swear to god, I will kick you out of my Tower! Go live on your farm, or on the streets for all I care!” Peter whirled around to see Clint cackling maniacally, while a very furious Tony stormed over, snow all through his hair. “Ugh, it's sliding down my neck! God, it's so cold! That's it, you're done for.” Tony scooped up a handful of snow, and with surprisingly good aim, threw it straight into Clint's face.

The sight of Clint, shocked and covered in snow, sent everyone else into hysterics.

“What are you laughing at, Cap? Huh?” Clint said, before he launched a ball of snow across the loose circle they were standing in, hitting Steve directly in the chest.

That was an act of war, and soon an all-out snowball fight had begun. It was a dirty fight, alliances were made and discarded like plastic bags, and no move was off limits. It was *awesome*.

Peter launched a snowball at Tony's grinning face, and his betrayed look was almost enough to make Peter feel bad, until his spidey-sense warned him of an incoming projectile and he rolled to the side. The snowball meant for him, thrown by Wanda, hit Thor instead, and the massive god turned around, towering over Peter.

“You dare hit me, mortal?” he boomed, and Peter would've been terrified, if he hadn't seen Thor just that morning, wandering into the living room with a brush lodged in his hair, begging for help as he pulled fruitlessly at the tool.

“It wasn't me, it was Wanda!” Peter said, pointing an accusing finger at the woman in person, who was hiding behind a tree.

“Snitch,” she yelled, before using her magic to fly herself up to a tree.

Everything was going swimmingly. Peter should have known it wouldn't last.

His spider-sense started tingling, but this time he knew it wasn't from a snowball coming towards

him, because he was currently hidden behind a rubbish bin. Somehow, he knew that the danger didn't pertain to him at all, but there *was* some sort of threat that was putting someone else's life in danger.

He expanded his senses, and his enhanced ears locked in on faint screams. "Hey, stop it! Please, please stop! Ugh, let go!"

The voice was female, maybe five hundred metres away, but Peter couldn't see her through the thick trees. He made a split-second decision and started racing towards the voice, leaving the confused shouts of the Avengers behind him as he sprinted across a bridge, getting closer and closer to the woman's cries.

His feet pounded on the ground, snow flying everywhere as he urged himself to go faster. He rounded a bend and was met with the sight of a lady, her curly blonde hair falling out of the loose bun she'd twisted it into, sitting on the ground, sobbing as she watched helplessly while a bulky man ran away with a purse - *her* purse, Peter would assume. There was a scratch on her cheek, and a rip in the arm of her bright pink puffer jacket.

The man was only about twenty meters away, so Peter ran to catch up with him, before landing a flying kick to his back and downing him in an instant. The man's head hit the ground with a thud, and he was knocked unconscious instantly. Satisfied that the threat had been neutralised, if his calmed spider-sense had anything to say about it, he grabbed the lady's purse and jogged back over to her, squatting down to check if she was alright.

"Are you alright, ma'am?" he asked, making sure his body language and tone was as non-threatening as he could make it. The adrenaline pumping through his veins made it hard for him to relax his muscles completely, but he tried his best.

"Y-yes, thank you," she said shakily, reaching out to take the purse Peter offered her with a trembling hand. He helped her stand, and as she was brushing herself off, Steve and Bucky came running around the same bend Peter had recently rounded himself. Tony and the rest of the Avengers followed a little later, all running at full tilt, until they stopped, confused, when they saw that Peter was unharmed.

"Kid?" Tony asked as he jogged closer, his voice wobbling slightly, and Peter felt a pang of guilt as he realised the fear in Tony's face. He didn't have to feel guilty for long though, because soon he was being wrapped in a tight hug. "Don't ever do that again, bud, you hear me? Never run off like that again, nearly gave me a heart attack, Jesus Christ, Peter," Tony whispered, the words sounding like a half-laugh, half-sob.

The "*I can't lose you again*" went unspoken, but both of them knew it was there.

"Uh, excuse me?" a timid voice interrupted their hug, and they reluctantly pulled apart. Peter locked eyes with the lady he'd just helped, and she spoke up. "I just want to thank you, again, for helping me." Her eyes flicked between Peter and Tony, a crease forming in between her eyebrows.

Peter grinned. "No problem, ma'am."

"O-ok, well I've gotta get going..." she trailed off, before glancing at all of the Avengers and then once more at Peter and Tony, and stumbling away.

They called the police on the thief, who was still zonked out on the ground, and when they arrived, Peter was escorted back to the car by an entire fleet of Avengers, all of them alternating between asking, "what were you thinking? Idiot!" and "Are you okay?" at regular intervals. Tony's arm

never moved from around his shoulders the entire time, and he kept squeezing him tightly, as if to check he was still there.

As they piled into the van again, Peter smiled to himself. He'd *saved* someone, maybe not their life, but a possession of theirs. He'd helped someone, put a little bit of good back into the world instead of taking it, for once. The feeling, he didn't know how to describe it, but it made him want to save *more* people, do *more* good things. Could he? After all the bad he'd put into the world, would he finally be able to remove some?

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Hope you enjoyed that!

Feel free to comment because we love hearing from you guys!

A Web of Secrets

Chapter Notes

What's up guys, we're back with another chapter. Just to warn ya'll in advance, this one's a bit of a monster...a 19,647 word monster, to be precise. Probably not the most conventional chapter length, but we had a clear plan for this chapter - it's kind of a mini story in itself - and there really was no perfect spot to split it. It's designed to be read in one go. So yeah, sorry, but also not sorry.

Also, we just wanna give a shout out to CapGirlCanuck for a quote of hers that we kinda snatched for our chapter as one of Bucky's lines. She suggested it to us in the comments of last chapter and it was too good not to include. Thanks for that one and we hope we did your quote proud ;)

Anyway! That's enough from me, we should probably allow you guys adequate time to digest this monster chapter. Good luck :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony *told* himself he wouldn't be sentimental.

He'd made a promise to himself, many, many years ago, never to venture down the path of sentimentality again. It was something he'd always actively avoided, because in his own experience, reminiscing the good times would only lead to the eventual destruction of them. It was pointless, stupid, and not to mention, *really fucking painful*, to become emotionally involved with things, to develop attachments, to - in simpler terms - be anything less than an emotionally-constipated asshole.

But *god damn*, the kid was giving him a really good run for his money.

Because, as slowly, unsteadily and dysfunctionally as it was occurring, Peter was getting better. *He was getting better*, and Tony hardly dared to believe it because surely, *surely* this was too good to be true. Surely it was nothing more than a far-fetched fantasy when Peter went his fifth night in a row without a single nightmare. Surely it was nothing more than a wishful illusion when the kid managed to calm himself down from a panic attack within a matter of seconds. Surely it was a sleep-deprived hallucination when Peter went into the kitchen and, without so much as a hesitation, picked up a knife and helped Sam chop up pineapples and ham slices for homemade pizza night.

Surely none of this was real. A caffeine-induced delusion, perhaps? One otherwise-boring Thursday, Tony tested this theory; after enduring several valiant internal struggles, he managed to last a whole day without a single cup of coffee. But he saw with his own eyes the way Peter volunteered to go and train with Natasha and Wanda in the fighting room - something he'd been steadily avoiding since returning from HYDRA. Upon running this theory dry, Tony wondered if sleep deprivation was the real culprit of this too-good-to-be-true fabrication, but after taking an unhealthily excessive dose of melatonin one night, he woke up to find Peter in therapy with Sam, cool as a cucumber, happily discussing how well things were going and with only one single Nerf bullet lying the floor.

On Friday, Peter smiled five times in one day, and absolutely none of them were forced. Three days later, that number had doubled. A week after that, and Tony was having trouble keeping

count of every genuine grin that stretched the kid's face.

Sometimes, in one of his now-frequently occurring moments of undeniable sentimentality, Tony would ponder what, exactly, kickstarted this massive improvement in the kid's mental condition. The therapy with Sam had definitely worked wonders; Tony had already gifted the man with several frisbee-sized pink lollipops and a bunch of Up-worthy balloons decorated with polar bear designs for his efforts. But in the early days, though noticeably happier, Peter had still seemed...restless. Bored. Edgy, as though if he didn't have a constant source of distraction, he'd drown in the memories of what he'd been through (which was probably where his insufferable 'fun fact' phase had originated from).

If Tony had to pin it all down to one moment in time, it had to be the outing to Central Park.

Something had changed in the kid since then. It had started slowly, barely observable to even the most emotionally observant of observers (which Tony, admittedly, did not hold the title of); as time progressed though, it had grown bigger and bigger, becoming more noticeable, and eventually cultivating into something that somehow made Tony want to simultaneously pick the kid up in a giant bear hug and never let go, or burst into an uncontrollable bout of waterworks. Yes, tears. This was the extent of the new-found sentimentality he'd uncovered. He was on the verge of *crying of happiness*.

Damn it. He blamed the kid.

More than once, Tony had honestly considered hitting up a few psychologists, telling them to re-think their methods. Clearly, all the antidepressants and confidential therapy sessions in the world couldn't compensate for one thing - a breath of fresh air. A *literal* stroll in the park. If Tony had known about Peter's apparent soft spot for the joys of grannyhood, he would have bought him a knitting set and a kitten-decorated shawl for Christmas.

He was happy. He was content. He was no longer bored; when he wasn't hanging out with the team, Tony or Sam in therapy, or annoying all of the above, he always found something to do, usually in his room. At first, Tony had worried about Peter spending too much time alone in there; these days, he actively avoided entering his room at all during daylight hours, purely because of the great number of incriminating things he could find the kid doing. He'd seen Peter, in no particular order: climbing the walls, hanging upside-down off the ceiling, swinging on one of the arms of his fan, creating a literal room-sized maze of webbing from overly-excessive amount of web fluid he'd created, standing paralysed in a handstand on the foot of his bed whilst *talking to himself*, and perhaps most hilarious of all, standing over a pile of smashed glass that used to be his bedroom window. According to the kid, he'd been throwing a football around the length of his room when he tripped and threw the ball off-kilter. Tony knew this story was bigger bullshit than Clint claiming he *hadn't* stolen all of the leftover pancakes from Sam's breakfast the day before (despite literal CCTV footage from Friday's archives showing the archer stuffing his face at four am - Tony had happily played that tape for the whole team the next day), but as far as he could tell, whatever venture into the world of rebellious teenagehood Peter had taken, it hadn't resulted in anything harmful. Unless you counted the damage to the window, of course.

But apart from the minor inconvenience of having to repair Peter's smashed window (which he grumbled about a lot more than was warranted; it took him all of five minutes), life was disbelievably, surreally, fantastically *good*. Tony had been reduced to a mess of sentimental pieces, of course, but he tried to embrace this as best as he could. The presence of emotions, as Pepper continually reminded him, was not a sign that the world was ending. It was, in fact, a normal mental function, and Tony was trying to view it as such.

Another indication of how *calm* things were. His tendency to exaggerate matters and inflate their significance until they were larger than Clint's still-not-yet-murdered Barnaby had - slightly - faded. *Slightly*.

The only one, tiny, ever-so-slightly-problematic issue that caused him to lose a few of his forty winks was - to put it blatantly - Child Protection Services.

It wasn't Ross putting the pressure on, this time, so that there was already a big bonus. Tony was thoroughly enjoying the absence of the man's prune-like features, and the lack of migraines that came from interacting with such an unpleasant specimen as Thaddeus was certainly another win. However, their statements to the United Nations in relation to both Peter and the Accords had, unsurprisingly, being released to the media at large, and it was only a matter of time before the public scrutiny about the legality, or lack thereof, of the Avengers assumed guardianship of Peter turned into an intervention of some sort. A direct threat hadn't been made, but Tony was counting down the days until some grey-haired CPS official showed up at the Tower, looking far too unenthusiastic about the wellbeing of a fifteen year old kid but reluctantly performing the job anyway. The amount of posts he'd seen on Facebook captioned with the hashtag #TheMysteryKidDeservesBetter was, to be completely honest, a little insulting. Did the world really think they were *that* incapable? They'd spared New York from a fully-fledged alien invasion, and yet no one seemed to trust them with the task of caring for one kid? Apparently, it was impossible to save the world and possess even mildly-inclined parental instincts at the same time.

The problem was, Tony really wasn't sure how to handle this definitely-only-minor issue. At their original press conference with the UN, back before - before *everything*, before shit went down and before HYDRA ruined it all and before Peter's *heart had stopped beating*-

Yes. Before all - *that* - they'd agreed to contact CPS, so that they could run background checks, make sure that the Avengers were qualified, and ultimately allow them to assume temporary guardianship of Peter. Now, Tony was hesitant. With all this media attention, *temporary guardianship* just seemed...wrong, somehow. Too flimsy, too fabricated. As though they were doing just enough to appease the masses of doubtful hashtaggers, but not enough to seem authentic, or legitimate, or as though they actually cared. And it wasn't the public image that Tony cared so much about in this scenario - he'd had no problem with looking like a total douchebag on public television before, and he didn't see why this time should be any different. No, what was worrying Tony was *Peter*. The kid wasn't deaf and blind, after all; he'd seen the posts, he'd heard the scrutinising comments on TV. If all the Avengers did was assume temporary guardianship - go through the legal processes, gain the stamp of approval, provide the bare minimum in order to calm down the collective heat from the media - surely it would feel, to Peter, like it didn't really matter. Like it was only a ploy to stop the haters. Like the Avengers assuming his guardianship was nothing more than a mild pain in the ass.

And if there was one thing that Tony refused to let happen, it was for the matter of Peter's guardianship to be corrupted by the damn fucking media.

He was sick and tired of the media. He couldn't name one good experience he'd had with a news reporter.

Apart from the Christine girl from Vanity Fair magazine - that, he had to admit, had been a *great* night.

~~~

The epiphany, he supposed, if that's what you wanted to call it, occurred whilst Bucky was in the

middle of cutting Peter's hair.

The kid had been in need of a trim - it had only been a month since the Central Park incident, and just over that amount of time since his last session with the scissors, but in that short period of time his ceaselessly unruly curls had only increased in their unruliness, and they now frequently hung lower than his eyes. Tony didn't like not seeing Peter's eyes. They were chocolate-brown and endearing and somehow *still* innocent, despite everything the kid had been through, and it was eyes like Peter's that restored some of Tony's little-remaining faith in humanity.

But this particular hair-cutting session was no ordinary, trivial matter. Peter had actually objected strongly to the idea of a haircut, whining that he wanted to grow it out a bit further - "Thor and Bucky think they're so cool being the only ones with long hair, let me challenge them, I would *slay* them with some delicately-maintained beach curls". What with Tony's already precarious emotional state from his recent discovery of sentimentality, to hear these words actually come out of Peter's mouth had been nothing less than traumatising, and he was fairly certain he'd shed actual tears at the thought of having to add *dreadlocks* to the list of goals in the kid's quest to achieve enlightenment in the realm of rebellious teenagehood.

Bucky and Thor, however, had accepted the challenge, which had promptly led to a silent and simultaneous thirty-second heart attack from the rest of the team, all of whom were strongly against the idea (even Steve had sided with Tony for once, which was an indicator if nothing else of how very tragically world-ending Peter with long hair would be). After much debate, a deal had been agreed upon; Thor, Bucky and Peter would all compete against each other in a vegetable-stacking challenge. This was a common ritual around the Tower, but not one that Peter had yet been introduced to; in essence, the Avengers took advantage of Sam's "health food fetish" and subsequent over-abundance of vegetables that were almost always abandoned for pizza anyway. The lonely vegetables had to be stacked, in any order of the contestant's choosing, to make a tower high enough to reach the ceiling from the dining table. The person to achieve this first was the winner.

Much to Tony's not-surprise, Peter had been entirely dominating both Thor and Bucky, but he'd become distracted by the appearance of a ladybug in a bunch of lettuce, which he had promptly halted his tower-building for in order to "rescue it so it doesn't die if it falls". As a result, Thor and Bucky had smashed the kid, and he now found himself facing the punishment for losing - getting a haircut.

Tony felt no sympathy. It was the kid's own damn fault for trying to save a ladybug.

"Peter, for God's sake, stop moving around," Bucky muttered, as he tried, unsuccessfully, to cut off an even layer of curls from Peter's fringe. To add even more salt to the wound, Bucky and Thor had been given the honour of performing the haircut. Neither of them could so much as cut out a square piece of paper neatly, and Clint was eagerly filming the horrendous process, much to Peter's annoyance.

"I swear, you guys better not be giving me a buzz cut, or I'll die," Peter whined. "I *will* die. Just to spite you."

"Whatever a buzz cut is, it sounds entirely unappetising," Thor remarked. "We are giving you something much more charming, never fear."

"Yeah, the ladies will be dropping dead at your feet over this one," Bucky added with a smirk.

Tony had to cough loudly to contain his snort. Next to him, Sam and Steve were practically suffocating, doubled over in fits of silent laughter. Tony didn't know what the fuck Bucky or Thor

were doing to Peter, but it definitely wasn't anything even remotely in the realm of attractive. He currently resembled Doctor Emmett Brown from *Back to the Future*.

"Shit," Peter cried suddenly. "Alert, alert, I've lost the ladybug."

"Excuse me?" Bucky demanded. "We're out here working our asses off for you on this artful haircut, and all you care about is your damn ladybug?"

"Hey, for all I know, I might have to permanently isolate myself to my room out of shame after you guys are finished with me," Peter protested. "I'm gonna need some company to distract me from my probably Hagrid-hair."

"Hagrid-hair?" Tony repeated incredulously. "God, kid, sometimes I forget you haven't had the joy of feasting your eyes on the cinematic masterpieces yet. Hagrid's hair is, like, Thor's length."

"Oh, I know *that*," Peter said casually. "It's written in the books. I was thinking more about his armpit hair. Or...you know...other areas."

Tony let out a bark of ill-concealed laughter at that, before receiving a *you're-so-immature* glare from Pepper. Bucky, on the other hand, looked to be in danger of fainting.

"You really think so low of us?" he demanded.

"I have half a mind to hurl a cabbage at you right now, mortal," Thor warned.

"Go ahead," Peter replied cheerfully. "Anything that I can use to cover up whatever the hell you're doing to my luscious locks. A cabbage would suit just fine. Oh, there Ronaldo is," he added, bending down and scooping up the ladybug, and causing Bucky to cut off an entire section of hair from the side of his head.

The Avengers howled with laughter as Bucky stared, horrified, at what he had done. Clint dropped his camera in between howls, but all Tony could think to say was, "Kid, are you telling me you literally named your ladybug Ronaldo?"

The laughter died down, and Peter shrugged, blissfully unaware of the atrocity that now sat atop his own head. "Sure. If I'm gonna look like Hagrid's armpit hair, I might as well embrace the whole personality too. Naming creatures is his thing, right?"

"Yes, Peter, it is," Tony said impatiently, "but at least Hagrid's names are even *marginally socially acceptable*. Norbert, Fluffy, cute, animal names of that nature. Peter, may I ask what the fuck is Ronaldo?"

"Hey, Ronaldo sounds cute!" Peter protested. "And the main thing is that it's *different*. It's exciting, it's flavoursome, it's *zesty*. Jeez, Tony, you're such a conformer. Be quirky, an individual, not a flock-following sheep. No one likes a sheep."

"Barton, you better still be recording," Tony announced. "It's official. We're playing this video at the kid's twenty-first."

"If I'm even speaking to you by then," Peter challenged. "Who knows. Maybe this haircut will turn out so awful that I cut off all ties. Cease all contact. I'll adopt Ronaldo as my new family and we'll go start a Ronaldo-fam somewhere."

"Come on, kid, facts of life say that you can't make a 'fam' without two to do the dirty. Where's your second Ronaldo, huh? You gonna steal some poor, innocent ladybug from-"



But he broke off suddenly, because it had just hit him.

The epiphany.

The answer to it all. Peter, CPS, *everything*.

The kid himself had said the word.

*Adoption.*

~~~

Peter remembered every single mission that HYDRA had sent him on. Every crime that he'd committed, every wrong deed that he'd gone through with, every evil scheme that he'd helped carry out, all of it. It all ran through his mind, colouring his thoughts in shades of black and grey, the strokes slipping out of the lines like a pencil held clumsily in the grip of a toddler, making his head a dangerous, messy place to be and sending him down the familiar spiral of *I'mbadI'mbadHYDRAmademebad*.

But Peter knew by now that familiar was not always good.

He'd told Sam about it, shared his thoughts just a little bit. Explained that he felt the need to repent for his sins, essentially, like he was Jesus Christ or something - he didn't know how religion worked. HYDRA hadn't felt the need to teach him about God and rituals and superstitions, because *obviously* HYDRA was the only all-powerful being. Like an old cowboy movie, HYDRA had essentially told him that there was only room for one God in this town, and a man with magic hands and a beard wasn't the one who would win the gunslinging fight.

But, religion aside, he wanted to make up for the evil that he'd been forced to commit for the past however many years - they'd all blurred together with time, one big massacre of innocent lives (and not-so-innocent ones, but still deserving of the chance to live).

Sam had suggested that he should volunteer at a soup kitchen, or donate food to the homeless. A charitable act of some kind. But Peter wanted to do *more* - he wanted to go *bigger*.

The pivotal moment in Central Park hadn't left his mind since it had happened. The way he'd rocketed around the corner, taking in the scene and drawing a conclusion within seconds. The lady sitting on the ground, defeated and sobbing as the living embodiment of shit ran away with her bag. The way his muscles had reacted on instinct, as if the need to be good, to help, was ingrained into his very genetic makeup. The way adrenaline rushed through his veins as he'd taken the bad guy down; the warm, glowy feeling in his chest as he helped the lady to her feet and locked eyes with Tony, seeing the terror there but also seeing the pride. He'd made Tony *proud*.

His dreams of dark shadows and twisted, barely-recognisable faces had all but faded away, replaced by himself, a valiant knight in shining armour, saving a beautiful damsel from a run-down castle guarded by a fire-breathing dragon...

Okay, maybe he'd watched a few too many Disney movies lately, but the idea remained the same. He was no longer the weak and helpless asset that could do nothing but watch as dark people with even darker intentions carved out his soul piece by piece. He was no longer the villain of his own story, ruthless and bloodthirsty in the way he stalked his victims. No, he was the hero, a

courageous and compassionate warrior who saw the evil lurking in the world and gave everything they had so it could be fixed.

It only took him a few days to realise that he wanted to become that valiant knight that he saw in his dreams. He wanted to save people, not from the huge, Avenger-level threats - there were enough people doing that already, and a good portion of them were probably sitting a few metres below him in the common room - but from the little things.

There was no one out there helping the little guy, making sure that people were safe on the streets and not falling prey to your everyday, petty crime: muggings, kidnappings and the like.

Peter wanted to be the person who helped the little guy - he had the ability, and he had the will. If he concentrated hard enough, he could have sworn he could hear desperate cries for help way down below him, in the bustling streets of New York.

But ultimately, it had been Bucky that solidified his desire to become someone who helped instead of harmed. They'd been having their weekly assassin club meeting, and the members included him, Nat, Clint, Wanda and Bucky. Honestly, it was actually Peter's first meeting because he'd only just started feeling like he could talk about his experience to someone other than Sam. Not even Tony knew some of the things that he'd shared in that group, or during his therapy sessions.

They'd been chilling, eating the food that they'd stockpiled for this occasion (enough to feed a small army, but somehow still always gone by the end of their little meeting), talking about everything and nothing, waiting for someone to feel brave enough to share their thoughts, when Bucky spoke up.

"Ya know, I had a rather poetic thought the other day."

"Oh yeah?" Wanda asked as she shovelled a chip heaped with guacamole into her face. She was a big fan of the dip, but her guac to chip ratio was simply appalling, in Peter's professional opinion. How was the chip even supporting the weight of all that avocado? It was probably stronger than *Steve*.

"People are like knives. Knives are given a sharp edge but that doesn't make them inherently good or bad, instead it's the people that use them which decide that. It's just like us, how we've been given a skill set, and for a good portion of our lives, we've been forced to use it for bad, but now we have the chance to change that, to use it for good."

"To wipe the red out of our ledgers," Nat said, her face calm, but her left eyebrow raising ever so slightly. Peter had come to recognise that particular tick as a sign that something was significant.

And significant it was. Bucky's words had been the tipping point he'd needed. For years, he'd been a knife, a jagged dagger used by HYDRA to commit the worst of crimes, to take the lives of countless innocent others. Now, he had the chance to change all that. Maybe he could do good with the sharp edge that HYDRA had given him. Defend instead of attack. Protect instead of harm.

And so, the beginnings of a plan for his super-cool, super-secret, super *hero*, alter-ego were born.

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Obviously, he started with a name, which was a lot harder than it seemed. He was a science guy, and probably an athletic guy too, thanks to his enhancements, but he wasn't a creative guy. He couldn't understand how writers could paint pictures with words, construct something so beautiful it brought tears to people's eyes, or so powerful that it could change someone's way of thinking forever, all with nothing more than a unique combination of letters of the alphabet. He didn't get

how artists could capture a single moment in time, perfectly replicating what they saw before them on a piece of paper, creating something out of a few strokes of a pencil on a page, something so valuable that people paid millions just to have the honour of displaying it.

So yeah, being creative wasn't his specialty, and this task called for immense creativity. It was his *hero name*, for God's sake! After an hour of extensive research and more than a few BuzzFeed quizzes, he'd come up with a squat. But, he'd at least managed to draw up a list of requirements for a good superhero name based on the other heroes he'd encountered, which was probably a fair few more than your average person, due to the fact that he lived with a gang of them.

They were all catchy and simple, yet descriptive of their whole *thing*, and most of them were two words, which seemed kind of weird to Peter. Like, Iron Man, Black Widow, Captain America, War Machine, the Hulk, Winter Soldier (or White Wolf now, apparently), the Falcon, Scarlet Witch - all two words, but why? Vision, Hawkeye and Thor all kind of ruined it, but to be fair to Thor, that was his actual *name*. Peter was kind of jealous that Thor's name had already sounded awesome enough to be left on its own.

But none of that helped Peter, because he didn't have a *thing*. He didn't have the media, or SHIELD to give him a name, and he certainly didn't have HYDRA-

But... HYDRA *had* given him a name. Not Asset - he wasn't going to use the name that he associated with pain and torture - but they had called him the Spider when he was on missions.

He remembered where the name had originated from, way back when he was nothing more than a test subject for them to run their freaky experiments on. But then one day, the scientists that had dictated his life for years had strapped him down to a table and let a spider, one unlike any Peter had ever seen before, crawl over his bare chest. He remembered lying there, helpless, unable to move, as tiny feet that he couldn't see scuttled across his torso, before a sharp pain dug into his shoulder.

The days that followed had been hell. His brain, fuzzy with a fever so high that he should've died, picked up hazy images and voices in the rare moments of lucidity. Concerned faces, though the concern wasn't for him, but rather the experiment that they had thought was failing. Hurried voices, fast and urgent as they poked and prodded at him while nausea twisted through his gut.

But then - clarity. He could see, clearer than he ever had before; in fact, every single one of his senses were dialed way up, like if it had been on a scale of one to ten, they'd be an eleven. It had been so overwhelming at first, so suffocatingly *different*, and he'd just wanted to *get out*, *get away*.

Despite his illness-weakened state, he'd managed to rip his way out of his restraints, not having time to dwell on just how strange that was because everything was *too much*! His only instinct had been to get away, and so he'd let his muscles carry him up, up and away. Quite literally. He'd only realised something was wrong when the scientists that had been standing by and monitoring his behaviour started crying out in alarm. "My God, he's like a spider!" someone had yelled, and that was when Peter realised that he had just scaled a wall and was perched, upside down, in a corner where the wall met the ceiling.

That had been a weird day, but from then on, during missions at least, he was *the Spider*.

So he had half a name. That was more than he'd had before, at least. But he didn't want to be just the Spider; he didn't want HYDRA to leak into this section of his life as well.

Spider Hero? Nope, that was way too dorky. He'd be laughed into his grave if he went around

calling himself that.

Spider Dude? Didn't really have the intimidating factor that he was looking for. He flipped up onto the ceiling and started pacing. Tony hated it when he did that, because he sometimes *accidentally* left footprints on the ceiling, and it was, according to the man, 'freaky'. But it helped him think, and Tony had been suspiciously absent recently anyway, which didn't bother Peter because he had secret spidery things that needed doing.

He continued pacing, thoughts and ideas whirring through his mind. *Ugh, this isn't working*, he thought, dropping down from the ceiling and landing a perfect flip - he loved the physically enhanced side of his powers, they made life so fun. *How would I even get out of here on a nightly basis?*

Peter's gaze drifted over to one of the windows in his room, and he grinned. *Perfect*. He made his way over, and fiddled with the little handle that would allow him to open it for a few minutes before giving up. Of course it was stuck; that was just his luck.

*Are you a science nerd or not? Dingbat, just take it off its hinges!*

*Hey, Sam said no calling yourself names!*

And now he was arguing with himself, fantastic. First sign of insanity.

Nevertheless, he rooted around in the drawers of his desk until he found a screwdriver that had the right head for the job at hand. After several labour-intensive minutes, the window was off and Peter was congratulating himself on his stroke of inner genius.

A quick look down the side of the building revealed all that he needed to know. He'd be able to climb down the side of the Tower and jump off onto a lower building, before swinging his way to wherever he needed to go. Everything was falling perfectly into place.

And then everything was falling. Literally falling. More like shattering, because he'd just tried to put the window back on and had accidentally used a little more strength than necessary, causing the glass to fracture and break, scattering little shards all around him. Damn, he was pretty sure this glass was missile proof too.

The sound of running feet interrupted his thoughts, and an out of breath and very panicked Tony burst through his door moments later.

"Kid, you alright? What... happened here?"

Shit. Peter's lying game was a little rusty. "Uh, ya know, I was just playing with my..." He cast his eyes around the room, looking for some inspiration for the dodgy excuse he was about to fabricate, and struck gold when his gaze found the football that Steve had bought him. It was currently lying on the ground, discarded because Peter didn't like the way the material felt under his fingertips. "My football! Yeah, I was playing with it and I tripped and fell and it just launched" - he made a motion with his hand that kind of looked like a bird dive bombing something - "straight at the window."

As he had predicted, Tony looked very far from convinced, but thankfully, he didn't push the matter further.

"Uh huh, sure, whatever you say, kiddo. Let's clean this up. You're not hurt?"

"What? Oh no, I'm fine. A-OK. No problemo."

~~~

Forty minutes later, the window was replaced (because apparently Tony just had spare glass panes that fit his window perfectly lying around), the glass was cleaned up, and he'd received a twenty minute lecture about being more careful and not playing around near glass. Now, however, Tony was gone and Peter could get back to business.

His spidery business.

What had he been doing again? Oh yeah, coming up with a name for his spidery business.

Webhead? Kinda sounded like an insult. Ugh, this was not going well, maybe he should post the job on one of those freelancer websites. 'HELP WANTED! ANYONE UP FOR MAKING A SUPERHERO PERSONA?'

Maybe he should ask FRIDAY? But no, then she'd snitch on him to Tony, and he'd already decided that telling Mr Tony-King-of-Being-Overprotective-When-It-Came-To-Him-Stark was *not* a good idea. And - wait, *damn!* How would he sneak out at night to actually do this vigilante thing if FRIDAY was watching his every move?

"Hey, FRIDAY?"

"Yes, Peter?"

"If I were to, hypothetically, sneak out every night, hypothetically, what would you do, in this hypothetical situation?"

"Well, Peter," FRIDAY began, and he was once again amazed at just how advanced she was - he was pretty sure he'd heard a hint of amusement, maybe even a little slyness in her tone. "If you were to, *hypothetically*, sneak out, I would have to tell the boss that you're gone."

"Could you maybe, like, delay telling him that? Perhaps to, I don't know, five thousand years in the future?"

"No, Peter, unfortunately I must tell Boss where you are if he asks."

"*If* he asks. Does that mean you don't have to tell him if he doesn't ask?"

"I... suppose."

"So I could hypothetically sneak out and you wouldn't have to tell him unless he hypothetically asked where I was?"

"That is correct."

"How often does he ask?"

"Not very often. He prefers to come and check on you himself."

"And... do you know the times he does this?"

"I do indeed."

"And they are..?"

"No later than ten pm, because he expects you to be asleep after that time, and doesn't want to risk waking you by checking on you." And, damn, was that a reprimand? She was like a vaguely strict babysitter.

"Excellent, most crime happens after then anyway. Thanks, FRIDAY. And, we're gonna keep this between us, right? And any spidery occurrences that may occur in the future?"

“You have my word, unless Boss asks me directly, in which case I will not be able to override my programming.”

“Fantastic. Congrats, FRI, you’ve just become my partner in crime, or un-crime I suppose, seeing as this whole thing is happening so that I can go out and stop crime.”

“I am thrilled by this,” FRIDAY replied, her tone as calm as ever, which gave him serious Captain Holt vibes.

Well, now that he had absolutely zero chance of being discovered by Tony (well, maybe less than a twenty percent chance), he should probably work on the whole name thing. He still hadn’t made much progress.

Spider Boy? No way, it insinuated, quite correctly, that he was a minor, and that would give people a clue as to who he was, which he didn’t want. The decision to keep his identity a secret had been among one of the first he’d made. He still wanted to go to school when the time came, and lead a relatively normal life, aside from the fact that he’d hopefully be an established vigilante by then, and he couldn’t do that if everyone knew he was the said established vigilante.

Something less...incriminating, then. More mature. Something like...

Spider-Man?

He rolled the name around on his tongue, said it a couple of times, and... yes . Yes, yes yes. With a hyphen! And two capital letters! Just to be extra.

And now, he had a name, he had half a game plan, and he had an origin story. He was basically a superhero already!

~~~

Step one to adopting a kid: don’t tell said kid you are, in fact, adopting him.

Yes, Tony knew how it sounded. He was fully aware that he’d have to spill the beans to Peter at some point. He knew that it wouldn’t really be considered an adoption unless both parties agreed to it - minor and...adult. Replacement parent. Permanent babysitter of a rebellious, wall-climbing, window-smashing teenager. Whatever you wanted to call him.

He understood, naturally, that any mildly sane adult wishing to undergo the process of adoption would probably consider *notifying the child they wished to adopt* to be, like, kind of urgent. Kind of necessary. Kind of the most fundamental and basic step to the whole fucking notion of adoption.

But Tony was no mildly sane adult. He wasn’t even sure he’d matured beyond the age of seventeen. In dashing looks, yes, but in the rational-decision-making process...well, he couldn’t deny he didn’t have a whole lot going on in that *very* rusty department. Ask him to build a sadistic robot with a mind of its own that was capable of crushing an entire city in a few hours? Easy-peasy lemon-squeezy, he was available for requests anytime. But propose the simple task of telling one fifteen-year-old kid about the whole *you-become-son-I-become-dad* thing...

It kind of wasn’t something he was emotionally equipped to deal with right now.

He didn’t know why. In fact, he probably did know why, but he didn’t like to analyse his emotions

where possible, so for all intents and purposes, Tony had no fucking clue where this sudden new bout of irrational, counter-intuitive behaviour had spurted from, although it didn't really come as a surprise. He'd been due for his monthly dose of insanity anyway - things had been going far too smoothly for far too long.

So, it would have to be a surprise. A nice, funky, spicy surprise. Peter liked surprises, didn't he? Of course the kid liked surprises - he was a spontaneous and increasingly-rebellious teenager, so a bombshell about becoming the kid of Iron Man for him was probably like the equivalent of six free VIP tickets into six different AC/DC concerts with a personal meet-and-greet at the end for Tony. There was no way this could possibly go wrong. Giving warning in advance was boring anyway. No one liked being informed *ahead of time* about things, and especially not such life-changing things as adoption. Maybe he'd throw the kid a surprise party next Friday to drop the news. Yeah, a party was probably the way to go. Definitely not a normal, civilised, deep-and-meaningful sit-down conversation or anything. That was most certainly a massive red card right there. Totally.

So, step one of *Tony Stark* adopting a kid: keep it from the kid you plan to adopt at all costs. For as long as possible.

Which shouldn't be too hard, as long as he kept his trap shut and avoided any conversations with Peter while he was drunk or overly sleep-deprived. Considering the kid seemed to be finding more and more ways to entertain himself in that room of his (which Tony didn't know whether to feel happy or concerned about), he figured the risk of interacting with the kid during one of his no-filter phases - well, even *less* of a filter than usual - was pretty low.

So, naturally, he moved onto step two: Google the shit out of it at ungodly hours of the morning.

Step three, he supposed, followed on chronologically from its predecessor: lose your mind over the Googling spree because all the legal documentation and official-looking procedures you'd discovered were stressing you out.

Which, only naturally, led to step four: the eventual admittance of your own incompetence, caving, and running to your much-more-logical-and-balanced partner who would surely have an answer to all your problems.

~~~

"Tony, will you just sit down and tell me whatever it is you've got to say? I'm not liking this whole walking-the-three-metres-between-my-wardrobe-and-my-door-on-repeat thing you've got going."

Tony abruptly stopped his pacing and turned to face Pepper, who was lying in her bed propped up against some pillows, and eyeing him with an expression that clearly read, *You're giving me a migraine*. Sagging, he let his face crumple into his hands and massaged his skin a few times. He let the hands drop. He looked up.

Nope. Nothing. Words were failing him faster than they had in his tenth grade English exam, and this time, he wasn't even being forced to write a five-page essay on the relevance of Shakespeare.

Great. Now he was thinking about Shakespeare, and he wanted to vomit. Just when he was trying to start an actually-somewhat-serious conversation with Pepper.

Oh, well. Indigestion was a bitch, right? Big bummer and all, but what finer time was there than this to make his quick departure?

Running off, now, are we? Coward.

Tony made a mental note to come up with a witty comeback to this irritating aspect of his consciousness later - seriously, it needed to learn to shut the fuck up sometimes - and instead blurted, "Change of plans, Pep. I'm feeling kinda gassy. Think I crammed in one too many of Sam's chilli-infused dumplings..."

But before he could make his hasty exit, Pepper had swiped at one of his wrists and yanked him back. "Uh, uh. No you don't. I know that look, I see what you're doing."

Tony raised an eyebrow at her. "What, getting ready to take a dump? I'm not sure whether I should feel honoured or disgusted that you know the signs of my bowel movements, Pep."

"Unsurprised is what you should feel," she returned steadily, "seeing as I've had to remind you to flush more times than I can count. But that's not the point, Tony."

Tony stared at her, and she stared right back. He wanted to leave, he wanted nothing more than to abort this entire, questionable, completely stir-crazy mission, because clearly he was just being a lazy ass and there was *absolutely no point* worrying Pepper, too, this was definitely something he could handle on his own, he definitely didn't need her more than he needed oxygen-

But damn it. She wasn't letting go of his wrist.

"Alright," Tony muttered, running an aggravated hand through his hair. "All right, I'll - I mean, Jesus Christ, where do I even start - it's kind of complicated- you might not be able to, like, keep up-"

Pepper shot him an incredulous look.

"Me, not able to keep up? Tony, you still haven't learnt more than one digit of your social security number, you once tried to buy me strawberries as a cry for forgiveness, and I've witnessed you pee in your suit in front of a mass crowd to demonstrate the filtration system. There's nothing you can throw at me that I would find even remotely complex or profound."

A string of razor-sharp, Pepper-style insults, combined with a blast from the past. Oh, this was good. He'd be able to waste a solid ninety seconds dissecting these into meaningless pieces, another two minutes on retaliating with some quick-witted insults of his own, and by then she'd have completely and entirely forgotten about why he ever even came in here-

"And don't even think about trying to change the topic," Pepper warned, dashing all Tony's hopes of a quick escape, "because I'm holding you captive indefinitely until you spill the beans."

"Who says there are beans to spill?" Tony protested. "Maybe the can of beans is empty, Pep. Or maybe it's just entirely non-existent. Have you ever wondered who was the person who decided to go with 'beans' as a reference to news, by the way, it's always struck me as slightly degrading to the food itself, having to share its name with petty gossip around the world..."

He trailed off. Pepper was glaring at him, her eyes irritated yet endlessly determined, and Tony knew there was no point beating around the bush any longer. Resistance was pointless against the slightly-scary willpower of Pepper Potts. He'd lost count of the amount of times he'd tried to hide something for her, and every occasion had ended up not-so-fun for him. If she wanted to weasel something out of him, she'd do it eventually. Why bother going through a painful struggle first?

But *shit*, this was going to be hard. He wanted to vomit again, and this time it wasn't because of Shakespeare.

"All right, fine," he gave in. "You win. But if you want the beans to be spilt, I'm gonna need you to

let go of my wrist first. I think you're cutting off the circulation in my pinky."

"Fine," Pepper allowed, and she abruptly released her death-grip on his wrist, causing circulation to return in tingling waves. God damn, that woman had some killer grip strength. "Now speak. Spill beans. Go."

Tony took a deep breath and collapsed into the bed beside her.

Probably not a good idea. You're about five seconds away from hurling.

He stood up again.

"Okay, so here's the beans. Spilling commencing," he began nervously, resuming his pacing in front of the bed. "Let's just assume, hypothetically, that there's a guy, right. We'll call him....I don't know...Bob."

"A hypothetical Bob," Pepper nodded. "Got it."

"And hypothetical Bob lives with this other hypothetical...guy," Tony continued, now wringing his hands violently in front of him as he paced. "Bob is much older, smarter, more charming and just all-round incredibly more attractive than this other hypothetical guy he lives with, just to set the record straight. And his younger, stupider, less-charming friend...we'll call him Jeff."

"Two hypothetical people: egotistical Bob and innocent Jeff," Pepper repeated, a smirk in her tone. "Continue."

"So, let's say, in a completely hypothetical situation of course, that initially, Bob and Jeff don't talk much," Tony went on. His heart was pounding so fast, it was a wonder he hadn't gone into cardiac arrest yet. "It's not that they don't like each other, right, it's just that Jeff, he's kinda...shy. To begin with. He had, like, a pretty shitty childhood, so he doesn't really trust Bob that much to begin with."

"Innocent Jeff has a traumatic origin story," Pepper nodded. "*Hypothetically.*"

"Yes, hypothetically, correct," Tony said. "Good. You're keeping up. Anyway, back to this hypothetical scenario. Hypothetical time is, surprisingly, a lot like normal time, in that it passes. And as this hypothetical time passes, Jeff starts to...open up. He talks more. And Bob, he's got all these connections, right, because he's super charming and likeable, and Jeff gets along with all Bob's hypothetical friends too. Jeff fits right into Bob's hypothetical family. Jeff turns out to be smart for a guy who used to speak in monosyllables. He also turns out to be a bit of a dork, but in a funny kind of way. Bob's still more attractive and possesses a superior supply of witty comebacks, of course, but Jeff gives him a good run for his money. And Bob and Jeff...they find out that, hypothetically, they actually kind of get along."

"Monosyllabic Jeff discovers the power of hypothetical speech and forms a paternal relationship with delusional, up-himself Bob," Pepper repeated dryly. "Well, looks like I'm keeping up so far."

Tony paused in his pacing and turned to look at her. "Oh yeah, but just you wait, Pep. See, this is where our hypothetical scenario really starts to - hypothetically - ramp up." He turned, resumed his pacing, tried to ignore the pounding of his heart. "You see, Jeff's hypothetically shitty childhood - it hasn't completely gone away. There are still some hypothetical people around, people from his early life, that have a sort of hypothetical score to settle with Jeff. And so, just when Bob and Jeff are really starting to jam together in this hypothetical scenario they've found themselves in, Jeff gets snatched away by some hypothetical ghosts from his past."

Pepper nodded knowingly. “Ah, a hypothetical problem arises, as hypothetical problems often do. Keep going.”

“Well, obviously, this causes Bob a lot of hypothetical stress,” Tony went on. If he was being honest, he had lost all control of his capacity for speech somewhere in the early stages of his story. He didn’t know half the shit he was saying anymore; he was too busy trying not to die of internal panic. “Because he really liked Jeff, you know? In a completely hypothetical way, of course, but he really cared about the kid - uh, I mean, *Jeff*. And so Bob conducts a hypothetical search for Jeff with some of his hypothetical friends, and eventually after a few overly-stressful but entirely hypothetical days, they manage to rescue Jeff and get him back from those ghosts of his past.”

“A happy ending, I like it,” Pepper smiled. “Is that the end?”

“Not quite,” Tony replied. He became aware of the fact that he’d stopped pacing. He also became aware of the fact that he was struggling to breathe. “You see, when they bring Jeff back, he’s in a hypothetical, but really bad, state. Like, he got beaten up. Badly. And Bob gets his hypothetical doctor friend to try and fix Jeff, and he does, eventually, but there’s this moment - this hypothetical, really fucking scary moment - where Jeff’s heart - Jeff’s heart stops beating.”

He could feel Pepper’s eyes on him, but he couldn’t meet her gaze. He let his eyes flick over the ceiling, the bed, the walls, the closet. Anything but her.

“And it’s at that moment,” he went on, his voice shamelessly shaking now, “when Jeff’s heart stops beating, that Bob - he realises that he doesn’t just care about Jeff. He loves him.”

He paused. Pepper didn’t say a word. The silence was far too loud, filled with never-ending echoes of what Tony had just admitted. Out loud. He’d said it *out loud*, and it didn’t matter if the situation was still entirely hypothetical because he could feel her eyes cutting through him, seeing right into his soul, and he knew that she knew what he meant. She’d known for ages. She’d known from the moment he’d started speaking.

Somehow, he managed to keep going, if only to put an end to the suffocating quiet.

“Bob - he would do anything to protect Jeff, because the only other person he cares as much about is his extremely-attractive girlfriend, who he also loves to death, by the way. Bob sees himself in Jeff, but he also sees that Jeff’s been through even more shit than he himself has, and he looks up to Jeff because somehow, Jeff hasn’t fallen apart yet. He hasn’t turned into a self-serving asshole like Bob. He’s still kind, and generous, and optimistic, and *adorable*. Jeff is so damn adorable. He has these puppy-dog eyes, and they get Bob everytime. If Jeff wants something, all he has to do is make eye contact with Bob, and the older guy will crumble in seconds. And the most amazing thing to Bob is that, despite all the fucked-up things Jeff has been through, there’s still light in those eyes. There’s still hope.”

Another silence. Pepper was still staring at him. Tony was struggling to hold back actual, real, genuine tears. *Tears*. Why the fuck were there tears in his eyes?

“And what then?” she asked softly. “What happens next, Tony?”

He took a deep, shaky breath, willing himself to stay composed. “Jeff gets better. Bob and his friends help Jeff cope with what he’s been through - well, not so much Bob, he’s more of a useless piece of sleep-deprived shit. He has a therapist friend, though, and this guy really helps Jeff. Jeff starts to smile again. His nightmares slowly go away. He becomes even funnier than he was before, and even more annoying, but in the best possible way. He makes Bob laugh. He makes Bob a better person. Bob isn’t such a douchebag when he hangs around with Jeff. And that’s when

Bob realises....”

He trailed off. Could he say it? Could he even get the words out?

“Realised what?” Pepper asked gently. “What did you realise?”

You.

Tony’s already-frantically racing heart now dropped entirely, because she’d said it. She’d openly acknowledged that this scenario was not, in fact, entirely hypothetical, and *fuck*, it would be so much easier to correct her. To remind her that this was nothing more than a lazy concoction of Tony’s hyperactive mind, designed to cure his current state of crippling boredom whilst simultaneously pissing her off for a few minutes. It would be so much easier to just run away again. Every instinct in his body screamed at him to abandon this entire topic of conversation.

Tony took another unsteady breath, and threw his instincts into the depths of hell. Exhaling, he met her gaze for the first time. If he was going to say it out loud, he wanted it to be authentic. True. He wanted her to know that he meant it.

Three more frantic heartbeats passed. They were so loud, he wasn’t altogether sure that Pepper couldn’t hear them.

“And that’s when I realised that I want to adopt Peter.”

~~~

Everything was going swimmingly if you asked Peter, apart from the fact that he’d lost Ronaldo, and his hair was now a lot shorter than he wanted it to be, thanks to Bucky and his novice haircutting skills.

But, in the hero department, everything was great. He had a name, a way to sneak out, a kind-of alliance with FRIDAY - all the logistics were sorted out. But there was still something missing, one piece left to the jigsaw of becoming Spider-Man, and eventually he realised what it was: a suit. Unfortunately, this was something he most certainly didn’t have lying around in his wardrobe.

He did, however, have a plan for it. Spiders would be involved somehow; *it was in the name*, of course they’d be involved. And he’d done some research into colour psychology, which was an actual thing, apparently.

Blue usually made people trust you, and red meant power, so he’d use them - he’d be powerfully trustworthy, trustworthily powerful.

However, getting the materials he needed to make his suit was slightly more of an issue. He’d need to go outside, and he wasn’t allowed to set foot out of the Tower without at least one Avenger for company. The problem was, every single one of the Avengers were smart enough to figure out that there was something weird about the fact that he was buying a red sweater, boots and mask, a blue onesie, fingerless gloves and goggles. They’d probably think he was trying to replicate Cap’s weird little outfit.

Except for maybe one...

Thor.

The god wasn't stupid by any means, but he was still ridiculously clueless about the normal social customs and behaviours of Earth. He wouldn't find anything even remotely odd about Peter's questionable shopping list. And so, with his new target in mind, he set out to find him.

~~~

"Hey, Thor, wanna go shopping with me?"

"Why are you going shopping, spidery boy?"

"Uh, just buying clothes and stuff."

"I wish to, but unfortunately I cannot. These pop tarts are practically begging to be devoured, and thus to be freed from this mortal realm."

"I'll make you twice as many pop tarts if you come with me."

"You have my attention, young Peter. I am considering...I will go!"

"Yes!" Peter grinned. "C'mon, let's jet."

"Wait," Thor interrupted solemnly, "I have one question."

Peter gulped. A curious Thor was not a good Thor. "What?"

"Why didn't you ask Stark to do this with you?"

Oh. A question about Tony, he could handle. "Oh, he's busy, yeah, real busy."

"Well, this seems 'legit' to me," Thor said, grinning as he used the one slang phrase that Wanda and Peter had managed to teach him.

"Nice," Peter laughed, holding his hand up for a high five. Unfortunately, he hadn't taught Thor what that was yet, so the confused look that he got in return kind of ruined the victory of the moment.

Nevertheless, they slipped their shoes on and headed out.

~~~

The shopping trip was... well, it had gone about as well as a shopping trip could go when your companion was essentially a huge blond bimbo with sparkly hands.

They'd managed to obtain all of the things that Peter actually needed before anything went off the rails, so that, at least, was a plus. After shopping around a large Target store, he'd found everything he needed, dutifully ignoring the weird looks he was getting. Sure, he was a grown-ass teenager buying a onesie, walking around with a ponytail-sporting Hercules-bodied god that probably looked vaguely familiar to everyone (it was surprising just how different Thor looked when he wasn't dressed in his superhero get-up), but did they *have* to stare? His spidey-sense was prickling vaguely and it was putting him on edge - he wasn't sure if the feeling was due to the eyes of the strangers that were fixed on him, or something more sinister.

Nevertheless, they made it out of Target without getting arrested (which was no small feat, what with Thor's intimidating-yet-sketchy appearance) before Thor loudly declared that he needed sustenance, causing even more weird looks from the pedestrians around them. Peter was almost

always hungry due to his super-metabolism, so they made their way to the food court. The unfamiliar surroundings made Peter's skin crawl, and his eyes kept darting around, scanning every face that passed, looking for even a hint of familiarity or sinister intentions. This was only his second time in a mall in his entire life, and the last time he'd been with Tony, who was probably the only person in the world who could make him feel safe at any time, no matter where they were. The Avengers were like his family, but they weren't *Tony*. They weren't his kinda-sorta-maybe-dad.

Thor had wandered off somewhere to get him and Peter a few pizzas. The business of winning a table in a full-to-the-brim food court like this one was incredibly bloodthirsty, but Peter managed to snag a six-seater table thanks to his amazing dexterity. It definitely didn't have anything to do with the fact that he probably looked a few seconds away from screaming - all the hustle and bustle of the mall was wreaking havoc on his senses.

He'd just sank into his seat, a small breath of relief escaping out of his mouth, when a shy voice interrupted his little moment of peace. "Excuse me, do you mind if I use the other end of this table?"

Peter glanced up from his phone, which he'd pulled out to check the time, and was greeted with the sight of a squat, Polynesian boy, probably around the same age as himself. His posture was slouched and he was shifting from foot to foot, all signs that he was nervous. His face, round and sincere, held a half-smile, so Peter gave one of his own before nodding and gesturing to the other end of the table.

The guy blew out a breath and took a seat. "Thanks, man."

Peter smiled back again and returned to his phone. "No problem."

This was followed by a few minutes of awkward, but not terribly so, silence, in which Peter wasn't sure whether he should try to initiate a conversation. Finally, the other guy took the burden off Peter's shoulders and spoke up. "First week back after winter break, right? Always kills you."

Peter looked up, hesitation curling in his gut. He didn't know this random person, but a quick scan of the crowded food court revealed Thor standing not too far away in line at Domino's. Thor wouldn't let anything happen to him, and besides, the guy looked even more harmless than a marshmallow. "Uh, I wouldn't know. Homeschooled."

"Dude, no way. That's so cool! What's it like?" the guy asked, enthusiasm blossoming on his face faster than Peter could comprehend. He slid a couple of seats closer, and Peter bristled, but the continued silence of his spidey-sense confirmed once and for all that this walking-marshmallow meant no harm.

"Uh, it's okay, I guess," Peter shrugged. "My family kind of does all the teaching, but most of the time it just turns into arguments over who's right." That wasn't even a lie. More often than not, Steve and Bucky would squabble over what had really happened during the war, which was the only part of history they were actually qualified to teach him about, and Bruce and Tony couldn't be in the same room with each other when one of them was talking about science, because the other would always cut in and try to re-explain it.

"Wow, so you've got a big family then?" the guy said, eyes wide with interest. "That's awesome, I wish I had a big family. It's just me, my mum and my dad in our apartment."

"Must be nice and quiet. I've forgotten what peace sounds like by now," Peter said wistfully, making the other guy laugh. "What school do you go to?"

“Midtown; everyone calls it the science nerd school, and they’re not wrong.”

A flash of curiosity sparked through him. “You can have schools for science nerds?”

“Well, they teach other stuff too, it’s required as part of the curriculum, but it’s a STEM school, so they focus a lot of their attention on that. Don’t get me wrong, I love it, but sometimes I’d rather stay at home and have a *Star Wars* marathon while gorging myself on Flaming Hot Cheetos.”

“You like *Star Wars* ?” Peter asked, a grin forming on his face.

“Uh, of *course* ! I only live and breathe every single detail!”

“No way, me too! Have you seen the new Lego set for it?”

“Oh my God, don’t get me started. I’ve been saving up for it but man, is it expensive.”

“My, uh, guardian, bought it for me,” Peter said, faltering a little when he tried to think of a way to describe who Tony was to him. Luckily, the other guy was too enthralled by Peter’s apparent good-fortune to notice, or maybe he just didn’t care that Peter didn’t seem to have normal parents.

“That’s actually so cool! I’m so jealous.”

They nerded-out about *Star Wars* for a while, until Peter heard a ruckus coming from the direction he’d last seen Thor. A group of... teenagers surrounded the god, obviously having recognised him for the Avenger he was. Peter would have laughed if it weren’t for the man’s utterly distressed face. Their eyes locked, and he saw the cry for help there clear as day.

“Shit, sorry, I’ve gotta go,” Peter apologised, standing up and collecting his things hurriedly.

“Wait, I forgot to introduce myself. The name’s Ned,” the other guy - Ned - said, sticking out his hand.

Peter took Ned’s hand and shook it, smiling. “Peter.”

“I know this might be kind of weird,” Ned began, looking slightly nervous, “but, uh, do you wanna exchange numbers? You’re kind of the only person I’ve met who’s both nice and a *Star Wars* enthusiast. I mean, there’s Flash, but he doesn’t fall into the nice category-”

“That means nothing to me, I have no idea who Flash is, but yeah I’d love to,” Peter cut him off, grinning even as he rushed to scrawl his phone number on a napkin. He could hear Thor’s distressed voice all the way from over here. “It was awesome meeting you, Ned! Text me!”

As he left to rescue Thor from the throng of salivating teenagers, he heard Ned mutter, “That was some Cinderella-type-shit right there. Except instead of the love of my life, I’ve found my future best friend. Fuck yeah!”

~~~

It had already been established that Peter wasn’t an artist. He couldn’t even satisfactorily draw a sheep, and that was literally just a cloud with legs!

But, the spider design that he’d stenciled onto the red hoodie he’d bought was *fantastic*, if he did say so himself. It was big, centered right in the middle of his chest - and God, the precise measuring process that had been required to make the design perfectly centred had nearly *killed* him. Imagine that, surviving the torturous reign and wrath of HYDRA only to be killed by a stencilling sesh. Wasn’t quite the tragically heroic death he was aiming for.

After his little drawing session, he decided now was as good a time as ever to try on his suit. It was about two in the morning, and everyone was asleep, but he webbed his door shut just in case - couldn't have anyone walking in and discovering him in a potentially compromising position.

With excitement, and more than a little anxiety, he started pulling on the several different items of clothing that made up his suit. This was *it*. He was actually doing this. He was going to be a *superhero*.

Peter pulled on the mask, mindful of the goggles that he'd glued to the inside - he knew that they wouldn't really add to his 'cool' factor, but they'd stop people from knowing his eye colour, and they'd massively cut down on the input, which would help him concentrate in the undoubtedly-stressful situations he'd be faced with. He sucked in a deep breath and turned to look at himself in the full-length mirror attached to his wall.

And, well...

It wasn't *great*. He looked like a little kid that had played around in his parent's wardrobe, or like the lame guy who didn't get the 'scary' memo for dress-ups on Halloween, but it would have to do. His only alternative was to waltz into Tony's lab and demand an upgrade, and he could imagine all too vividly how *that* conversation would go - "Hey, I'm just going to use your materials and money to make a super suit. Free of charge, cause we're buddies, right? Oh and yeah, you heard me correctly. I'm a superhero now." Peter shuddered at the mere *thought* of the dignity loss.

So he'd have to work with what he had, and what he had was a bank account funded by Tony Stark himself. It was pretty full, but the man also reviewed his purchases monthly to make sure he wasn't being too frugal with his money (though the billionaire's definition of frugal was probably a little different to a regular person), and he'd definitely notice something was off if Peter suddenly went on a super-suit materials splurge. He didn't even know how to *get* half the things he needed for a super suit, much less do it without Tony noticing.

But he'd had a little extra time on his hands, so he'd drawn up plans for a way more complicated version anyway, just in case the fantasy ever magically came true. In his opinion, it was one of the most technologically advanced suits in the world, second only to the Iron Man suits. It was based off of the black suit that he'd worn for his missions at HYDRA, thin enough for him to perform the complex acrobatics that he frequently used in his fighting style, but made of a special combination of vibranium and... spandex (that was a secret he'd never tell anyone, it was too embarrassing) that would protect him from most weapons. A bullet would still do a fair amount of damage, but his spidey-sense usually warned him with enough time for him to dodge those. He'd even programmed an AI for it, which had been affectionately named Karen. She was nowhere near as advanced as FRIDAY, but she'd do the job. He didn't actually know if he'd ever get the chance to manufacture this version of his suit, but drawing up the specs had been fun all on its own, so he wasn't too worried.

Once he'd struggled his way out of the suit and taken the webs off the door, he hopped into bed, plugging his phone in to charge. When the screen lit up to acknowledge that the device was, in fact, charging, he saw that he had a message from an unknown number.

Hey, idk if this is the right number, but it's Ned. From the mall. The guy you talked about Star Wars with. That Ned. Anyway, text me back if this is Peter.

Peter grinned, tapping out a quick message to tell Ned that he had sent the message to the right person, before saving the number to his contacts.

Was this what having a friend was? He had the Avengers, of course, and he would always have

them, but they were more like family, and all twice his age, at least - in fact he was pretty sure Thor was somewhere in his thousands.

Could Ned be his first actual, true, *real* friend? Who would have thought that he, Peter, would have gone from being one of HYDRA's most elite assassins, tortured and brainwashed into submission and robbed of his free will and moral compass, to a regular, almost-superhero with a family of crazy adults to watch his back and his first possible friendship blooming... all in less than six months? Certainly not him, but he was so, so happy with how far he'd come. Admittedly, the path that was still ahead of him was still filled with all sorts of issues and legalities (they'd discovered the other day that, because he didn't know his real name, they wouldn't be able to find any old records of his original identity before HYDRA), but it was looking a little brighter now, a little easier to traverse. There were less obstacles, less roots tangling with his feet and tripping him up, less seemingly colossal boulders that he had to climb over, and the row of people lining the side of the path who always stooped down to help him when was stuck on the ground, unable to get back up, had just welcomed one more person into their midst. Continuing on from where he was now was going to be a challenge, but he had people who were more than willing to help him through it.

And besides, Peter never turned away from a challenge.

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Step five of adopting a kid: thank the fucking lords and lordesses themselves that you have a much more emotionally balanced partner nearby to console you during the emotional breakdown you will undoubtedly experience.

"Pepper, what the fuck, what was I thinking, *I can't fucking do this*," Tony ranted, pacing back and forth in their quarters. "I'm not qualified to do this, I'm probably the least stable fatherly figure a kid could hope for, the only experience I have in the realm of fatherhood is from my dear old man and he wasn't exactly a role model."

"Tony, stop," Pepper interrupted harshly. "Stop it. This right here, this is you dramatising everything. I don't need a Shakespearean-style soliloquy from you about your insecurities, I need you to *calm down and focus*."

"Pepper, I cannot calm down when we are *actually seriously considering this!*" Tony cried out, grabbing fistfuls of his hair and tugging them in his agitation (damn, there went his perfectly-gelled look, why did he even bother?). "You realise what we are suggesting, right? Just think about it for a second. Let the magnitude of it sink in. *Me* - as a *father* - to Peter."

"Yes, that's what adoption is, Tony," Pepper replied. "You didn't have a problem with the notion two days ago, when you were giving me your totally-transparent Bob and Jeff bullshit."

"Two days ago, I was delusional," Tony replied sharply, accelerating the speed of his pacing. "I wasn't thinking straight, I was being uncharacteristically optimistic, I hadn't even processed my own fucking idea-"

"Two days ago, you were the healthiest I've seen you in a long time," Pepper corrected him. "You were openly talking about your emotions, you *weren't* shutting me out, you had a spark of hope in your eyes...Tony, I'm not blind. I know it's been rough, these last few months, what with HYDRA and the Accords and...everything. But these last few months have also been the *happiest I've ever*



*seen you.* You need Peter. He's good for you. Why run away from all that?"

"Because *Peter doesn't need me* ," Tony said forcefully. "He needs a real father, Pep. One with experience, one who actually knows what the fuck he's doing. He definitely doesn't need a guy who substitutes caffeine for sleep and spends more time with some hunks of metal than he does with actual humans. He definitely doesn't need a guy who single-handedly almost wiped out an entire city, thanks to an AI that was born out of his own *arrogance* and *utter stupidity* . And he definitely doesn't need someone who sat there and *just fucking watched* while he, the kid, got tortured in front of his own fucking eyes--"

"Oh, tell me you did not just bring that up," Pepper said, very slowly and very quietly. "Tony, you better take that back right now, or I might actually slap you."

Tony stared at her. Opened his mouth, closed it again. Released the tufts of hair he'd been strangling with his fingers. "I don't--"

"No, don't even try to argue with me, Tony," Pepper warned. "We have been through this *so* many times, and I cannot believe you just had the audacity to bring it up again. As if it was valid. As if it held any merit whatsoever."

"Personally, I think it held a lot of merit--"

"Tony, *none of that was your fucking fault*. I don't know how many times I need to say it, I don't know if you're even hearing me through that thick skull of yours, but I need you to try. You have to understand that not everything is about you. HYDRA being a bunch of sadistic psychopaths is not something you have any control over. I thought we'd been through all this, I thought you *agreed* that you were being ridiculous."

Tony took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds, feeling the pressure build up in his lungs as he tried to pull himself together. His exhale turned into a groan, and he closed his eyes, running a tired hand over his face.

"You're right," he admitted eventually. "Of course you're right. I don't know where that came from, I was just...ranting. Unfortunately, it was one of my less eloquent ones."

"Tony, I don't think you've ever given an eloquent rant in your life," Pepper pointed out gently.

"But this..." Tony opened his eyes and looked at her, wondering how much of the complete and utter helplessness he was feeling was betrayed by his own face. "Look, I didn't mean any of it. Not really. I just have this...issue. With, um, commitment, I think. Whenever I make a big decision, especially one that involves actually putting in some effort rather than being a lazy ass, I sort of...freak out, go into autopilot. Sorry you had to witness one of my Ice Age-worthy meltdowns."

"It's far from the first," Pepper remarked. "And seeing as I know your pride won't cope if I don't apologise for something as well, sorry about the whole threat of violence."

"It's far from the first," he threw back at her.

She rolled her eyes, but smiled nonetheless. "It just...it hurts me too, you know. Seeing you blame yourself for things like that."

"Yeah," Tony sighed, feeling very exhausted all of a sudden. "I have a bad habit of dragging you down with me whenever I go off the rails. I guess it's just lucky I ended up with the only woman in the world who isn't the abandoning type."

“Well, if you want to be *technical*, there was that time when I almost quit,” she reminded him, a playful note to her voice. “Back in the good old days of Obadiah Stane.”

“Yeah, let’s not bring up that nutcase,” Tony muttered darkly. “I might start throwing things.”

“And I *did* resign from being CEO of Stark Industries,” she continued, ignoring him. “But apart from that, totally loyal, yeah.”

Tony scoffed a little. “What, two incidents? That’s practically saint-like, Pep. Plus, I was being a total douche on both occasions-”

“What is this,” Pepper interrupted, eyebrow raised, “Tony Stark, siding with *me*? Admitting his douchebag tendencies? Are you feeling okay?”

“No,” he admitted, scrubbing a hand over his face again. “I’ve just had an emotional outburst, Pep. I don’t even know *why*. God, I feel like a hormonal teenager.”

She looked at him in that all-knowing way of hers, and Tony again felt like she was seeing right through him, down into the very fabric of his soul.

“I know why,” she said softly. “It’s because you’re scared. You care about him so much, and this is one of the biggest decisions of your life. You’re scared you’re going to ruin it somehow, you’re scared of *yourself*. ”

Tony stared right back at her, heart pounding.. “I really hate it when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Read my mind like fucking Severus Snape.”

Pepper chuckled. “Nice one, but I see you avoiding the subject again. Come here.”

Swallowing, Tony forced his wooden legs to move and inched closer to where she was standing. She wrapped her arms around his neck and massaged his tight muscles.

“You’re going to be great,” she told him. “All of this, it’s going to work out. I can feel it.”

Tony looked down at her, a million different protests running through his head all at once. He selected the loudest and most pressing one. “I don’t even know how to tell him, Pep. What, do I just walk up to the kid and be like, *Kid, you ever feel sad about not having a surname of your own? Want me to change that for you?*”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” she told him. “For now, no more procrastination. It’s time to brave the application process and get this thing moving.”

She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss, before all but dragging him over to his multitude of computers and forcing him into the chair in front of them. “Let’s get to work.”

Tony looked at her and nodded, and suddenly felt the beginnings of a grin forming on his features.

*Once again, Potts to the rescue. You wouldn’t last two seconds without her, you know.*

“Oh, and by the way, I think this is a new record,” Pepper murmured in his ear. “Two emotional conversations in two days. Should I be performing a retinal scan to make sure you’re not an imposter?”

Tony sighed. "It would be greatly appreciated if you could kindly disembark from your high horse. You've taken my spot. I want it back."

"Adopt Peter, and then I might heal your bruised ego. If I'm feeling altruistic."

"High horse. Off. Now."

"Start Googling, Tony."

~~~

Step six of adopting a kid: cease all melodramatics, take several minutes to mourn the loss of superior high ground to a much-more-stable partner, and brave the actual process of adoption.

In other words, die internally. Several times over.

It was *really fucking hard*. First, they had to find an organisation that would accept non-mainstream adoptions. Many of the websites that they looked at required the adoption of a kid in the foster care system, and Tony doubted that Peter's cosy twelve years of brain-blending at HYDRA would qualify. Then, there was the matter of choosing an organisation that would cooperate, and perhaps even accommodate for, a meeting with Child Protection Services. Both the media and CPS were still on the Avengers' case about the questionable circumstances of Peter's stay at the Tower, and both Tony and Pepper knew that the only way to silence the scrutiny once and for all was to clear the matter with CPS. If that meant showing proof of the legality of their adoption, or perhaps even an intervention on the part of CPS, well, Tony supposed he would find a way to endure it. It did, however, complicate the adoption process somewhat.

It was for that reason that both Tony and Pepper found themselves working all throughout the morning, afternoon, and well into the evening. Tony would have felt bad about spending so much consecutive time away from Peter, but it seemed that for once, the stars had aligned in his favour; the kid had apparently gone on a shopping spree with Thor, for no logical reason other than to upgrade his wardrobe. If he continued on his current path, he was in danger of becoming even more materialistic than Tony himself. He made a mental note to bring that up with the kid later.

It was rather ironic, he supposed, the perfect timing of it all: Peter's innocent obsession with collecting things, in particular items of fashion, had kicked in at just the right time for Tony to secretly plot an adoption behind his back. If Tony had been one for superstition, he would have questioned whether a higher divine deity had been involved in this too-perfect coincidence that, for once, had worked in their favour. As it was, he was just glad that the kid was off spending some time out of his room. And interacting with Thor, for that matter - the uncultured swine could definitely use educational sessions from Peter on the ins and outs of pop culture.

Finally, by ten pm that night, they'd completed the application and sent it in for review. According to the website, it could take weeks or even months for the eventual acceptance or denial of their application, and Tony was severely hoping for the former, because he wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't completely lose it if he had to wait for more than two weeks for a response. Maybe he'd be able to nudge it all along a bit if he flashed a few hundred dollar bills.

This whole adoption thing had him uncharacteristically nervous, and he didn't like it. He needed to regain his cool. Tony Stark was cool, though Peter would probably say otherwise. He was cool like a cucumber. That was the main reason why he was respected and admired by less cool, less cucumber-like people. Where was his cool now? Where was his cucumber-ness?

He made another mental note to buy some cucumbers next time he was out grocery shopping

(which admittedly, wasn't often). Maybe if he ate a few of them, their spiritual aura of coolness would transfer into his brain, and he'd transform back into his usual, suave, ruffled-by-nothing self.

If merely considering the prospect of fatherhood sets you off like this, you'll be in a padded cell by the time you finally adopt the kid.

"Shut up," Tony snapped out loud.

Pepper turned to him and raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, am I breathing too loudly for your delicate ears?"

"No," he replied. "Just talking to one of my many inner demons. I've really gotta perform an exorcism on these guys at some point."

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Step seven of adopting a kid: Wait.

And wait.

And wait some more.

Proceed to stock up on products for hair growth to deal with the increasing amounts of hair-tugging resulting from the overwhelming stress of having to *wait*.

Tony. Hated. Waiting.

He was many things, but patient was not one of them.

He just wanted to know. The looming threat of having to tell Peter the big news wasn't going away anytime soon, and Tony would feel a lot better if he knew when, exactly, that terrifying, heart-stopping moment would be arriving. Or if it would be arriving at all. After all, he hadn't exactly been able to use a convenient fake ID in the application form. Whoever the assessor was knew exactly who they were dealing with. A man notorious for a long line of big fuck-ups, usually on an extreme, world-ending kind of scale and extremely public, for the whole population to see and share. Hell, if *Tony* had the task of deciding whether another carbon copy of himself was eligible for adopting a small person, he'd have been thrown off by his own reputation and would've been saying "hell to the no" faster than his carbon copy could blink.

The one saving grace of it all was Pepper. About a week after they'd filled out the application, she decided to permanently take over dealing with CPS, purely because of her much-more approachable and diplomatic manner. She'd managed to console both the press and the organisation, explaining that the legalities were currently being taken care of and an official decision would be announced about Peter once everything had been finalised. The Avengers supported both of them in the process, all of them still entirely in the dark about the adoption thing, because Tony had no more of a fucking clue how he was going to drop the '*Dad-Tony, Son-Peter*' bombshell on the team than on Peter himself.

Speaking of Peter, well, the kid's much-needed happiness streak was continuing, and apart from Pepper's just all-round amazingness, it was like the light in Tony's darkness. The darkness being going just about fucking insane from having to wait, of course. Tony had expected it to be harder to conceal from Peter, but unusually, the kid had barely noticed how edgy Tony's nerves had been lately. For a perceptive kid, he'd chosen just the right moment to turn down the observance dial a little. They still hung out together, of course - they'd finished reading both *Order of the Phoenix* and *The Half-Blood Prince*, the ending of which had caused Peter to bawl non-stop for four days

straight whenever anyone mentioned anything even remotely related to the character of Dumbledore. They'd binge watched Brooklyn Nine-Nine several times over, taken part in several family game nights with the Avengers, had even more game nights just between the two of them and Pepper, and bantered endlessly while they tinkered in the lab. It was just an added bonus that he'd somehow managed to keep Peter in the dark about the whole adoption thing.

The kid didn't suspect a thing. Really, it was endearing, how innocent he was. Although the prospect of finally dropping the news to Peter still made him want to vomit from anxiety, he supposed that when the world-changing moment finally did come, there would be one silver lining.

The look on Peter's face when he found out that Tony had kept a secret from him for so long.

Oh, Tony couldn't wait. It would be just what he needed after the loss of his high horse to Pepper.

Unfortunately, he was still nowhere closer to *hearing back from the application process*.

Which led him back to square one.

Waiting.

Tony fucking hated waiting.

Shit. This adoption thing was either going to complete him, or destroy him. And at this point, it was hard to tell which outcome would emerge victorious.

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The suit was finished.

He had his superhero name.

He'd even decided on the area that he wanted to patrol as Spider-Man.

Back in the day, when he was young, naive and homeless - so about three months ago - he'd walked through all of New York, and he'd made an observation, using all of his detective skills to do so.

New York had *so* much crime. It was shocking, really. No one should live in the city. Why weren't people fleeing to the countryside at this very moment?

However, because of the size of the city, he couldn't feasibly protect everyone in it, so he'd decided to limit himself to one borough. Manhattan had been his first thought, because the Tower, and therefore he, was right in the middle of it, but the crime rates for the area were relatively low - at least when compared to the rest of the boroughs.

So then his mind had slipped to Queens. He'd spent most of his time there when he'd lived on the streets. He wasn't sure why, but there was something about the area - faint memories that ghosted to the surface of his mind whenever he roamed the pavements, like a really watered down version of *deja vu*. There was just something about the place that screamed *familiar*.

And besides, while he'd been there he'd met people, made connections. Not. like, bad ones; they were good ones - friends, even.

Like Mr Delmar, the owner of the bodega responsible for the world's *best* sandwiches. He'd always made the time to say hello, and sometimes had slipped Peter a number five sandwich, squished down real flat (even though it was a "crime against humanity" in Delmar's opinion) or a pack of gummy worms on days when business was slow.

And then there was Mrs Katsopolis, a kindly, old lady. Peter helped her carry her groceries sometimes, and she always bought him a churro afterwards. She said that they didn't have churros when she was a little girl living in Santorini, and that that was a real shame because they were heavenly, a gift from the angels themselves. She'd almost thrown a fit the first time Peter had met her purely because he'd told her he'd never tried a churro when she'd asked what he thought of them.

He missed Mr and Mrs García too. They had five kids and all lived in one little apartment, but whenever they saw Peter they'd invite him inside and offer him a meal so elaborate, it could probably have been served to the queen, and it was always cooked to perfection. Oh, their tortillas were to die for - not even Sam could make tortillas like Mr and Mrs García.

Anyway, he was basically a super cool vigilante already. It was just the...the whole *going out and saving people* thing that he had an issue with, and it all boiled down to two key reasons.

The first was that there were *actual lives* on the line. If he was even a second too late, or his reflexes were just a little too slow, someone could *die*. He didn't know if he could deal with any more blood on his hands.

But, at the same time, if he didn't do anything, there'd be even more blood on his hands - even more red in his ledger, as Nat would say. When you could do the things that he could, but didn't, and then the bad things happened? They would have happened because of him, and that was infinitely worse.

This whole thing was an attempt to right the wrongs that he'd done in the past, and he had confidence that his moral compass, which had only strengthened with the time he spent away from HYDRA, would override the terror of knowing that real people were going to be counting on him.

But the second, and much more pressing worry, was that he was betraying Tony's trust. That man had given him *everything*, a roof over his head, clothes on his back and food in his belly (although in terms of the healthy, not causing an early death and irreversible damage to your liver type food, he supposed it was Sam who he was obliged to thank). But Tony had always been there for him, helped him through countless panic attacks and nightmares, and he'd loved him as well, maybe not with his words so much, but definitely with his actions. Above all that, though, Tony had saved him. Peter may have stopped those HYDRA agents from killing the man that fateful day, but Tony had *saved* him. Saved him from the haunting shadows that HYDRA had permanently scarred into his mind and proving, once and for all, that he did deserve to be loved.

Tony loved him, and Peter felt like he was tossing that into the wind, as if he didn't care about that at all. The thing was, though, he *did*, he cared so incredibly much, but if Tony looked him in the eyes right now and asked him not to be Spider-Man...

He didn't know if he'd be able to obey.

But Tony didn't have a clue about what Peter was doing, and so Peter didn't know if he'd approve of his choice. The only thing he had to go on was the glimmer of pride that had been in Tony's eyes right after he helped out the lady.

So, he was hesitant, but he'd decided he was going to go out tonight. He was going to save people,

and look (at least kind of) cool doing it. Just him against the world. Peter, kicking ass and taking names.

Oh, Jesus Christ, he didn't know if he could do this. But he had to, because there were people who were counting on him, even if they didn't know it yet.

His phone buzzed in his hand, pulling him rather unceremoniously out of his thoughts. It was Ned, with impeccable timing as always, texting him about Midtown. Ever since Peter had let it slip that he was thinking about going to an actual school, Ned had spent the majority of his time texting reasons about all the reasons he should attend Midtown. The reason that came up the most often was, "because *I'm* there," and Peter couldn't deny that going to school for the first time in his entire life would be a much easier experience if he knew at least one person.

Ned: *They have an Academic Decathlon team! You're a genius, right? We've been needing a new member for a while.*

Peter: *I know, Ned. You've told me, like, seven times. And I'm not a genius, I'm just not particularly challenged in the intellectual department.*

Ned: *Spoken like a true genius. But come on! It'd be awesome! Then we could talk about Star Wars for six hours a day! Michelle would hate us.*

Peter: *I don't know who Michelle is. You keep referencing people and I have no clue who they are.*

Ned: *Whoops, my bad. She's this girl I sit with at lunch. Actually she's the only person I sit with. Neither of us have any friends, so I guess we kind of just gravitated towards each other.*

Peter: *Yikes, that sucks, Ned.*

Ned: *Nah, it's not that bad. She can actually be kind of funny, when her nose isn't stuck in a book. Wicked smart too.*

Peter: *Everyone there's wicked smart. It's a school for mini-geniuses.*

Ned: *So you'd fit right in! Besides, not everyone there is quite of the same calibre. I'm pretty sure Flash is only there because his dad's some rich lawyer that donates a ton to the school.*

Peter: *He's the dick, right? Who'd have thought that there'd still be bullies in a nerd school.*

Ned: *Not me, dude. I can't wait for the day when somebody gives him a good kick up the booty.*

Peter: *That'd be fun to watch. Especially if you do the honours.*

Ned: *Another reason why you should get yourself over here already. Anyway, hate to break this up, but I've gotta run, man. My mum's making pancakes!*

Peter: *Awesome. My uncle's trying his hand at some French recipe. We've been waiting for breakfast for hours, but whenever we ask when it'll be ready, he just screams that "perfection takes time."*

Ned didn't know that he lived with the Avengers. He also didn't know anything about his shady past or spider powers. To Ned, he was just a normal kid, and he wanted to keep it that way. It was why he referred to Sam as his Uncle. Whenever he talked about the Avengers and their crazy tendencies, he called them his Uncles, or Aunt, in Natasha's case.

Ned: *Lmao, your family sounds chaotic. I love it.*

Peter: *Me too :)*

Peter: *Bye. Eat some pancakes for me.*

Ned: *Will do. See ya.*

Peter chuckled before shutting his phone off and plugging it back in to charge. He'd been on it since seven in the morning and while the Stark battery was amazing, not even it could withstand his slightly unhealthy nomophobia.

A heavenly smell floated through the crack in his door, and Peter grinned. Sam must have finally finished whatever it was he was cooking for breakfast.

He peeked under his mattress where his spidey suit was stashed - not the most original of hiding places, he knew, but it did the job. Besides, it wasn't like it'd actually be discovered anytime soon. The Avengers all followed the unspoken rule that no one could go into his room without his permission. It had something to do with giving him as many choices as possible because they'd all been taken away from him before. Whatever it was, it certainly made his life easier.

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Whenever Peter and Natasha battled it out in the training gym, it was a sight to behold, which meant all the available Avengers came to watch. Apparently their fights looked like a perfectly choreographed dance, all fluid movements and intertwined limbs. Their fighting styles were so similar, having been trained by the same organisation, that each were able to perfectly counteract the other's move.

If you blinked once, one of them would be on the ground, and then if you blinked again, the other would be held down on the mat. The most likely outcome changed with each second, which obviously meant that the Avengers felt the need to bet on the winner.

It had been one of their most-used forms of entertainment before HYDRA had kidnapped him, but he'd only recently started feeling... *well* enough again to practice his moves with anyone. His plan to be Spider-Man had brought on a new vigour to train because months of relatively peaceful activity meant his skills had gotten a little rusty. He could definitely still decimate almost anyone in a fight, but unfortunately when facing off with the deadly Black Widow, things were almost perfectly matched... for now. If everything in the Spider-Man department went as planned, he'd be getting practice every night, and he'd be able to defeat Nat in training again.

For now, however, he'd have to deal with it as she slammed him into the mat again. *You asked her to do this*, he reminded himself, but it was kind of hard to see the merits of sharpening his skills with one of the most highly-trained agents in the world when his vision was clouded by stars that had sprung up when his head smashed against the padded mat they were fighting on.

A chorus of "oooooh," resounded from the vague direction of where the Avengers were gathered, watching their fight from a safe distance.

Peter was pretty sure he heard Clint yell, "K.O.'d, that'll teach him for beating me in Mario Kart. Get him Tasha!"

Now that just wouldn't do. Spurred on by pure spite and pettiness, he brought his legs up and wrapped them around Nat's waist, flipping them so she was the one pressed up against the mat.



“Haha, victory!” he crowed. But then Nat played *dirty* .

She wriggled one of her arms free from his grip and started *tickling him* . The *audacity* . Except he didn’t have the breath necessary to express his outrage, because he was wheezing from laughter way too hard, which was an issue in the middle of a fight - no matter whether it was a playful one or not.

Before he knew it, he was being flipped again, and his back was met with the surface of the mat yet again. “Oh, this means war,” he coughed out between wheezes, bringing his weak and shaking hands up to tickle her too.

But as Peter wiggled his fingers around awkwardly, looking more like he had octopi for hands than anything else, he was met with nothing. No laughter, no squirming, not even a cold side-eye. Nothing. Just a knowing smirk stretched across a passive face.

“Are... are you not ticklish?” Peter stuttered, wondering just how invincible his new foe was.

“I used to be when I was younger, but then my nerve endings were cauterised in a fire,” Natasha replied, her face as calm and unreadable as ever.

“Wait seriously? What the fuck...”

Her solemn mask was cracked with a smug smile. “No, of course not, that’s crazy, Pete. You’re so gullible.”

“That’s fair. I can’t even argue with that. Did you know Bucky once told me that he had a twin brother named Hank who’s still alive today, except he’s like, really old now, and then let me believe that for *two weeks* ?”

“It’s true, I did do that,” Bucky called from where he was standing next to Clint, who offered him a fist bump at the admission.

“You guys are so mean to me,” Peter complained. This is basically bullying.”

“Are you guys bullying the kid? Why’d you start without me?” came a voice from the doorway, and Peter shot up from his spread-eagled and rather undignified position on the ground.

“Tony!” he yelled, running over to the man and wrapping him in an enthusiastic hug. It had been ages since they’d last talked about anything other than *Harry Potter* , and he’d barely seen the man in days. If he didn’t know better, he’d think Tony was up to something, but that was ridiculous. As if he could hide something from Peter - contrary to what the press said, Tony Stark was not an expert in deceit, though he liked to think he was.

“Hey, kiddo. Missed me?” Tony chuckled, running a hand through Peter’s hair.

“Maybe a little. Where’ve you been?”

Tony stilled, breaking the eye contact they’d been maintaining, and Peter squinted at him suspiciously. “Oh, ya know, Pepper was hounding me about some SI stuff,” he answered, waving a hand dismissively.

“Alright...” Peter was not convinced. As he’d said, Tony Stark was not a master at deceit, and right now he was acting like an amateur robber who’d just been caught red-handed robbing a bank.

“Hey, I was thinking we could get started on that *Harry Potter* marathon I promised you. We

haven't finished the last book, but that doesn't mean you can't watch the first six movies."

All suspicion flew out of Peter's mind at that. In hindsight, that may have been Tony's exact intention, so maybe the man wasn't as bad at being deceitful as he had first thought. "Really? Oh my god, yes!"

"Great! We'll make it an Avengers family movie day. Avengers? Assemble the snacks."

~~~

What. The. Fuck.

How could something be so good and so bad at the same time?

He'd just watched his way through the first four *Harry Potter* movies and... Jesus Christ, he honestly didn't know how he felt about them. He had so many grievances, like Harry's eye colour, the complete omission of Peeves, and Dumbledore's reaction to Harry's name being pulled out of the Goblet of Fire. Tony had explained that Daniel Radcliffe was allergic to contact lenses, and he *supposed* he could let the eye colour thing go, but the Dumbledore thing and the Peeves thing were, in his eyes, completely unforgivable. He'd so looked forward to seeing the havoc that Peeves was so well-known for on the big screen, but *no*, he'd been robbed of the experience. What a waste of a multi-million dollar budget.

But then again, it was *Harry Potter*, and as the budget for the movies grew, so did their quality - a directly proportional relationship. Reading the books was one thing, and they were undoubtedly infinitely better than the movies, but there was something about seeing the characters that he'd fallen in love with onscreen that was just so...intriguing.. And comparing his mental image of the characters with the actors that played them was definitely fun. Krum had been the most surprising to him - he'd pictured a dark-skinned guy with like, shoulder-length dreadlocks and feet that naturally pointed outwards when he walked. He didn't understand how people could walk like that, but he'd pictured it for Krum, and the image that he'd been presented with instead sent him into hysterics - it was just so different to what he'd pictured.

But now, everyone was heading to bed, and Peter was struck with the realisation that it was nine thirty pm, and he had told himself that he'd go out as Spider-Man in exactly half an hour.

Well, shit.

~~~

Tony still hadn't quite erased the image of Madam Maxime eating crumbs out of Hagrid's beard from his mind when it finally happened.

The response to his adoption application came back.

Tony knew the exact moment they arrived. He knew this because he'd set up several temporary systems on FRIDAY to alert him whenever he received an email from the adoption organisation. He'd been checking it obsessively for weeks, wondering if the system had failed and the response had somehow come through without alerting him (and conveniently ignoring the fact that the system was designed by him, so of course it wouldn't fail).

But, after the longest month of his life, and potentially the most sleepless (for once not due to Peter's nightmares, which had all but disappeared, but because of his own adoption-induced anxiety), the tell-tale pinging sounded through FRIDAY's speakers.

And Tony's heart nearly stopped.

"Uh, is Sam doing some super-secret baking or something?" Clint asked from his spot seated on the couch. After their Harry Potter movie marathon, the team were all completely exhausted, both emotionally and physically (his eyes were incredibly sore from staring at the TV screen for nine and a half hours straight), and they'd happily retreated to the communal area for one quick last hot chocolate before bed. If there was one thing Sam Wilson could make right, it was a warm cup of hot cocoa with a few marshmallows on top. Due to this, "hugs-and-hot-cocoa-before-bed" had kind of become one of the Avengers' many secretly-super-lame rituals. For a bunch of superheroes that were tasked with saving the world on a regular basis, it was ironic how totally un-intimidating they could be at times. If the Rock of Ages happened to burst in right now with his mind-controlling glow-stick thing, he'd probably piss himself laughing.

Then again, was the guy even capable of producing something as humane as piss? Tony didn't know. He made a mental note to ask Thor.

For now, though...he had much more pressing matters to attend to.

"Somebody called?" Sam asked, walking in from the kitchen with another tray of steaming mugs in his arms. "I brought round two."

"Disappointing," Clint scowled. "I was expecting you to blow me away with some Snow White-worthy apple pies, or something."

"That wasn't Sam's timer," Tony rushed to say. "I got FRIDAY to alert me when the blueprints were finalised for a new suit I'm making. Sorry guys, but I gotta jet."

He stood up from the couch, nausea suddenly curling in his gut, and was about to make a hasty departure before he remembered - the kid. The whole reason his heart was currently trying to beat itself into cardiac arrest.

Hastily, he backtracked and ruffled Peter's hair.

"Night, kid," he said quickly. "Don't stay up too late. And don't be surprised if you can't fall asleep easily. Those images of Daniel Radcliffe imitating a whimpering rat whilst struggling to fake cry in Prisoner of Azkaban don't fade away anytime soon."

He walked away with the sound of Peter's laughter ringing in his ears. Usually one of his favourite sounds in the world, but currently it served no greater purpose than to increase the nauseating churning of his stomach. He felt like he was about to throw up. Sam's hot chocolate was inching its way slowly back up his esophagus, and it didn't taste nearly as deliciously sweet as it had on its way down.

He entered the elevator. His heart was pounding. There was a damp, moist feeling on his skin. Sweating. He was sweating. An email alert had caused him to break into a sweat.

He all but stumbled onto the floor of his workshop, his breath coming in harsh, laboured pants. If he didn't pull himself together, he'd die of suffocation before he even managed to unlock his computer.

He staggered over to the nearest laptop and opened it. With shaking fingers, he typed in his

password and pulled up his emails.

The most recent one stared back at him in bold letters, addressed from AdoptUSKids. He swallowed back some regurgitated marshmallow and opened it.

One word stood out to him, bold against the sea of legal nonsense that surrounded it.

*Approved.*

~~~

The Avengers were *that* family.

The one that wouldn't let each other go to bed without spending a solid twenty minutes saying goodnight. And because they were a rather big group, this was no quick and easy process.

Normally, Peter really enjoyed it because it was just one more way for him to show how happy he was in the Tower. Funnily enough, the sadistic HYDRA agents that he'd grown up with as his only company hadn't been big on hugging each other goodnight.

He managed to escape the climax of the affair by saying he felt off, brushing off their concerned questions with a quick, "I'm just tired. Need an early night," before practically vaulting over the couch they'd gathered on to drink their hot chocolates and running away to his room. Thankfully, Tony had already retreated to his workshop, which was lucky because otherwise, there was a large chance he might have felt inclined to follow Peter to his room and insist they make a start on *The Deathly Hallows*. And as much as Peter enjoyed *Harry Potter*, he had bigger things on his mind right now.

He felt like he was about to throw up, nerves twisting in his stomach like a snake, and he was pretty sure that this was how he'd gotten away from the communal area without being questioned further about his sudden tiredness.

He'd have to deal with numerous questions about his well being in the morning, but if all went well tonight (as in, he didn't die, or let someone else die) he'd be able to answer their questions with a smile and a completely truthful, "yes."

The problem was, he couldn't go out until everyone was asleep, and he wouldn't know if everyone was asleep unless he quietened his thoughts and started listening. Was this an invasion of the Avengers' privacy?

Whatever, it wasn't exactly like any of them had any secrets to hide.

He concentrated his hearing, stretching it out like a cramped limb, and listened to the sounds of each Avenger getting into bed, one by one. Steve was always first - the old man - and Bucky usually followed soon after because he "needed his beauty sleep."

He could still hear Pepper and Tony moving about, but that wasn't anything other than normal. Those two were night owls through and through. Pepper was always up doing something Stark Industries related - the amount of work Tony piled on her was almost criminal, but she completed it all with unparalleled levels of composure and expertise - and Tony was just a crazy insomniac with a penchant for getting up in the middle of the night and fiddling around with things in his lab,

which made him Peter's greatest threat in regards to who was most likely to find out about Spider-Man.

But he'd have to take his chances, because ten o'clock was drawing closer, and Tony and Pepper were still pottering about in his workshop. It's not like they'd come out, right? Tony was working on a new suit, and that always kept him occupied for several hours at least, and Pepper had said goodnight just like everyone else had. There wasn't a reason for either of them to come out.

So, trusting that his totally logical thought process was right, and with his heart beating in his throat, he lifted up his mattress, smiling when he saw the Spidey suit. It was time.

~~~

He was frozen.

He was completely, totally, utterly frozen.

He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. How did one even breathe? What did the process of inhaling oxygen even entail? What was the magic ingredient required for the healthy functioning of lungs? Where was the inhale, the exhale? Why wasn't his chest rising and falling? Where was some *fucking air*?

"Tony."

He jumped at the sound of Pepper's voice, and this startled him into breathing again. Saved by his girlfriend, it seemed. For the gazillionth time.

"What's going on?" Pepper asked, as she walked over to where Tony stood, paralysed, in front of his laptop. "Did you hear back from them?"

He tried to tell her. He tried to form words. But he was still frozen. His eyes were fixed on that one, fateful, life-changing word, and he couldn't move.

Thankfully, Pepper seemed to work out that he'd entered a state of temporary speech paralysis, because she didn't wait for an answer. She stood next to him and peered down at the laptop, and Tony saw her eyes skim over the contents of the email, saw them slow down as they hit the only line that mattered, saw them stop completely on that one, terrifying word-

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Tony. Oh my God."

She grabbed his shoulders and turned his head towards her, trying to elicit some response from him, and then Tony felt the paralysis flood out of his limbs, felt the blood return to his face, and he allowed himself to be swept away, carried by the waves of ecstasy that Pepper was currently radiating. He'd never seen her look so happy, and the rare look of unadulterated joy in her features was infectious.

He couldn't help it. He started to smile.

The smile turned into a grin, which morphed into a laugh. And then they were both laughing, half-collapsed on top of each other, struggling to intake oxygen as they howled with hysterics, and Tony couldn't tell which one of them sounded more unhinged, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter,

because he'd been accepted, and there was a long way to go, *but he'd been fucking approved*, and Pepper was happy, and he was happy, and he'd never felt so happy...

Eventually, their laughter died down, and with the silence that replaced it came realisation. Tony could tell that it dawned on Pepper at exactly the same moment that it did to him.

She turned to him and looked him dead in the eye.

"You know what you have to do."

~~~

Peter, when he wasn't on a mission or fighting someone, was a very clumsy person, but *by God* did he wish that wasn't true right now.

The suit was difficult enough to put on during the best of times, i.e. when the room wasn't dark and he wasn't shaking from adrenaline and anxiety, but combined with those factors it became damn near impossible.

"Fuck," he cursed under his breath as he toppled to the floor for the third time, rolling yet again to absorb the impact and minimise the sound. He'd done more roly-polies while trying to get his foot in the damn onesie than he had in the past month.

Okay, take it slow, getting worked up will make you careless. Breathe. Try again.

He slowly lifted one foot up, curling the other one to maintain his balance. Balance was literally one of his powers, but he couldn't even manage to stick his stupid foot in the stupid leg hole - he was going to make a terrible hero.

Eventually, he managed to pull the whole onesie on, congratulating himself on his incredible feat. This was probably equivalent to, like, climbing Mount Everest, or walking across the Grand Canyon on a tightrope. He was amazing. A literal God on Earth.

He pulled the sweater on, wincing at the frayed ends at the shoulders where he'd cut the arms off. He wasn't a whiz with scissors either, and the untidy edges made him want to die, just a little. Nevertheless, he moved past it, because he was making the best of a situation with limited options. Who'd have thought he'd be missing his HYDRA suit right about now? At least that was well-made - just missing a bit of colour and, you know, decorated with a few joyous memories of torture.

Ok, now all he needed was his mask and his... boots. Goddamnit, he'd have to go through the process of putting his stupid, onesie covered foot into something all over again. This was not going as smoothly as he'd planned.

Peter succeeded in pulling them on, like the pro he was, and straightened everything out, before risking a glance at himself in the mirror. He looked totally silly, but he was standing tall and proud, and he knew that he was going to be able to help people like this, even if he looked like a cartoon character that had walked right out of the TV.

With that, he turned and faced the window, and what lay outside.

~~~

He knew what he had to do.

It was simple. A simple equation. Like math. Like all those things he'd been taught since kindergarten.

Two plus two equals four.

Four plus four equals eight.

Adoption plus approval equals *it's time to tell the kid*.

So Tony stood in front of Peter's door and he followed the equation.

He raised his hand to knock.

~~~

Peter's heart was pounding in his throat, the beat seeming to throb throughout his entire body. Before him lay all of New York City, and he could see the lights of Queens glinting not too far off.

This was it. The moment he'd been both anticipating and dreading.

The window swung open easily, and he nervously felt for his web shooters, checking if they were still there. It was a stupid nervous habit, like making sure the phone that you hadn't taken off silent mode since twenty-twelve was, in fact, on silent mode just before a movie began. He always carried his web shooters with him, didn't know if he'd ever be able to leave the Tower without them securely fastened to his wrists, but right now he needed them, and so he pushed all his doubts, his worries and anxieties to the back of his mind.

Took a deep breath of the cold night air.

And lept.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo, if you even made it this far and managed to slog your way through all that, thanks for reading! We hope you liked this slightly-too-overloaded chapter and managed to somewhat make sense of the chaos you just read. Feel free to leave kudos or comment, it's like happy drugs for us every time that happens. See you next chapter, which hopefully will be much closer to the realm of a normal length, and thanks for sticking with us so far!

Not My Gucci Wallet!

Chapter Notes

Hey lads. We're back with another chapter and while it's not as big as the previous monster, it's still pretty beefy.

Stuff happens, secrets are revealed, but not how you'd expect them to be. There are a few cliffhangers cause it wouldn't be a story written by us without them :)

Ok hope everyone's staying safe and that you enjoy this train wreck lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Honestly, Peter didn't know what he was thinking.

Leaping out of a window? How stupid could he be? Especially when that window was like, seventy stories off the ground - Stark Tower was *really fucking tall*.

He windmilled his arms, looking like one of the stupid characters in those cartoons Clint was always watching, trying to *slow down* before he went splat on the pavement. Finally, he managed to turn himself the right way up, and he was able to flick his wrist towards a semi-tall skyscraper. Not as high as the Tower (though not many buildings were), but still pretty tall.

There was a moment when everything and everyone stilled except Peter. He continued to plummet towards the grey street below him, which, despite the late hour, was still bustling with people - New York, the city that never sleeps, what could he expect? But then, his webbing connected to the sleek metal and concrete that made up the exterior of the building. It pulled taut, swinging Peter in a wide arc that had him whooping with joy.

He'd forgotten how much fun it was to swing on his webs, how light and free it made him feel. HYDRA had hardly ever let him do it while he was on missions - probably due to the fact that web swinging wasn't the most discrete mode of transport, especially for assassins - and he hadn't done it at all since Tony took him in.

It took him a little while to get the hang of it again, but once he had he was swinging his way towards Queens, and looking really cool while doing it, if he did say so himself.

The tired New Yorkers below him paid no attention to the figure in red and blue above their heads, swinging his way between the buildings, progressively getting closer to the ground as the buildings grew shorter the further away they were from Manhattan, and Peter was glad. He didn't want anyone to be scared off by the news that there was an unknown dude flying around the city on webs. He'd need to establish that his new web-swinging hobby was born strictly out of good intentions so that people didn't dial nine-one-one every time they saw him.

Peter came to a stop on the roof of an apartment building and took the time to expand his senses, muscles tensed and ears straining for any sort of kerfuffle.

When he heard the first faint cries for help, he was ashamed to realise that adrenaline wasn't the only thing that started to pump through his veins in response to the sounds. There was excitement too, and he knew it was shitty - he shouldn't have been excited that someone was in danger - but this was his first job as Spider-Man, and he couldn't help the tingle that spread through his entire

body.

He webbed his way towards the screams, relying on his hearing alone to direct him and pushing himself to the limit as the screams grew more desperate. He could hear how high-pitched they were, and Peter realised with a jolt that there was a youthful quality to them. It was a *child* that he could hear.

He arrived at the source of the noises, and looked through a window to see a man, waving a broken beer bottle and very clearly drunk off his ass. There was a woman cowering in the corner, her body shielding a little girl, about six or seven if Peter had to guess. The girl's face was red from her crying, and as the man lurched forwards she screamed again, clearly terrified.

Peter's mind brought up a memory from his past. Himself, young and naive, and his handler, malicious and oh so ready to take advantage of his innocence. There had been many times when he'd been struck down and beaten by men both older and more powerful than he was, and there was no way he'd let another kid be traumatised from the same experience.

He pushed the memory away - it wouldn't help him to get pulled in by their hooks, not when he needed to focus - and made the quick decision that there wasn't enough time to find a 'legal' entry into the apartment. Laws were relative anyway.

He leapt, and crashed through the window, rolling before popping up in between the man and whom he could only assume were his wife and daughter. The wife screamed, and pulled her daughter even further away from them. Good - that was good. Less of a chance they'd get hurt while Peter took this dude down.

His spidey sense screamed at him, and he ducked just in time to avoid the broken bottle that Mr Drunk had swung at his head. Apparently he'd recovered from the shock that had overtaken him when a onesie-clad-stranger burst through his window.

Peter slapped (read: lowkey karate chopped) his wrist, and the man dropped the bottle.

"Now that's not very nice. Didn't your mother ever teach you manners?" Peter quipped, dodging out of the way easily as Mr Drunk charged clumsily at him. The guy - and God, Peter *wished* he could have claimed credit for this because it was *hilarious* to witness - wasn't able to stop his momentum, and ran straight into the wall, knocking himself out in the process.

"Well, that was easy," Peter said, grabbing Mr Drunk's wrists and binding them together behind his back with some webbing. His first mission and he hadn't even had to hit a single guy. He was pretty sure not even Tony could claim that achievement.

"Who are you?" a timid voice asked from the corner, and Peter jumped.

Shit, he'd forgotten about the wife and daughter.

He spun around, and stuck his hand up in an awkward wave. "Hi, uh, yeah, who am I? Uh, you know, just your friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man, I guess." Peter winced at his awkwardness. Why was he like this? "Might want to call the police, ma'am. He's not gonna stay knocked out forever, and my bet is he won't be happy when he wakes up."

The lady nodded, fumbling for her phone with trembling hands. Peter waited awkwardly while she talked to the operator, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He glanced up from his hands when he heard soft footsteps padding towards him, and saw the little girl, looking up at him with watery blue eyes and a trembling lower lip. "Hey, kiddo." Huh, maybe Tony had influenced him more

than he thought. The little girl didn't say anything, just continued staring at him. Peter crouched down so he could be on eye level with her. "My name's Spider-Man, what's yours?" he asked gently, sticking his hand out for her to shake.

She seemed to hesitate, before gripping his hand tightly with her smaller one and shaking it. "Ava," she whispered.

"Wow, Ava, you're really strong. Got a good grip there."

Ava's lip twitched, and Peter smiled back at her before realising she couldn't actually see his face. "What's going to happen to my daddy?" she asked unsteadily.

"He'll probably go to jail, kiddo, he wasn't being very nice."

"Oh." Ava paused, seeming to process the fact that the man who had been tormenting her for goodness knows how long was finally going to be gone. "My daddy was never very nice."

Peter's heart broke at the acceptance in her voice. "That sucks, Ava."

"All the other daddies gave hugs but my daddy didn't."

And, aw shit. Peter was about to start crying. It was probably why he made the impulsive decision he did. "Do you want me to give you a hug?"

Ava smiled. "Yes please."

~~~

Peter left the apartment with a small grin on his face, and a lipstick mark on the cheek of his mask. Ava's mother had hung up the phone and turned around with tears tracking down her cheeks. For a second, Peter thought she was upset at him - maybe the guy had actually been, like, good or something, as hard as that was to imagine. But then she'd wrapped him in a tight hug and pecked his cheek, whispering "thank you," over and over.

He'd managed to unentangle himself from the pair once the police got there, wished them all the best, bid them adieu, and then left the building the same way he came in. He'd have to remember to leave a couple of hundred dollar bills on the sill tomorrow night.

He swung onto the roof of another apartment building and tried to stop himself from freaking out like the absolute nerd he was. He'd just saved someone! *Two* someone's, from an abusive husband/father, and, OK, admittedly that part was not good and it filled him with disgust when he imagined just how long it must have been going on without anyone fixing it, but *he'd* intervened. He'd saved Ava and her mother.

Peter patrolled Queens for hours, and as he fell into a kind of persona - kind and caring, but oh so sassy, and way more confident than he'd ever felt with the mask off. It wasn't that it was fabricated, not at all - it was like the mask was bringing him alive, uncovering a whole new part of himself that he hadn't known existed until now.

He helped more and more people as the seconds ticked by. There was the tipsy lady who couldn't find her shoes (he'd discovered them in a dumpster and then escorted her home), and the tourist who was hopelessly lost and trying to find a specific bar where he was meeting a friend (turns out he'd been walking aimlessly on the opposite side of the borough to where he needed to be).

He felt fuzzy, but not like an *I've-been-drugged* fuzzy, it was a happy fuzzy, and the warmth that

was pooling rapidly in his chest repelled the chill of the night. He sat on the roof happily for a few minutes, swinging his legs idly and staring up at the orangey-grey sky. Light pollution sucked, and Peter missed the stars that he'd glimpsed on various missions in different parts of the country.

He'd seen an art project that displayed what major world cities would look like without light pollution. The sky over New York City would be *breathtaking*, and sure, there was something beautiful in the sprawling mess of graffitied streets and millions of artificial lights, but nothing could beat the raw elegance of Mother Nature herself.

A hushed and confused voice pulled him out of his reminiscing, and he perked up, listening intently. "Hey, dude, what are you doing?" The voice paused, and the note of fear and panic in their next words sent shivers up Peter's spine. "Whoah! What the fuck? Put that away, you're gonna get us in so much trouble!"

"I know what you did, Jonah, and now you're gonna pay."

Well, that was alarming. *That* voice sounded angry, and the words of its owner trembled, which was always a sign of high emotion. Peter knew that when emotion was involved, things could go south real fast. Time for him to jump in, then.

He swung across a few rooftops, and quickly located the alleyway from which the voices were coming. He edged down the wall, stifling an exclamation of disgust when his foot slipped in something wet and vaguely sticky. He should write a book: *Fifty Shades Of Ew*.

He peered down at the two people below him, and determined that they were both guys, somewhere in their mid-teens? They both looked like textbook rebellious youths - ripped denim vests and beanies slouched over greasy, shoulder-length hair. Peter struggled not to roll his eyes at all the fashion no-no's that he could see in the get-ups (Wanda had educated him on the topic, and now he couldn't stop picking apart people's outfits wherever he went. He had once criticized *Captain America* for wearing patterns on patterns).

But then all humour leaked out of his expression, because one of them had a gun, and was pointing it at the other. He took that as his cue to drop in.

"Hey now, I don't think you're meant to be playing with guns at your age," Peter called out. "They're more of a big boy toy don't you think?"

His hands were placed non-threateningly in front of him as he jogged towards the pair. He decided it would be better to enter rather normally, rather than dropping from the sky and potentially starting the kid with the gun.

Kid-with-a-gun whirled around at the sound of Peter's voice, and he fumbled with the weapon. Peter could tell he had no idea what he was doing - his grip and stance were all wrong and he'd be blown straight onto his ass if he fired it. "Who the fuck are you? A cartoon character?" Kid-with-a-gun spat, his eyes wild and scared. Those were not the eyes of a criminal.

Peter ignored the jab and delivered one of his own. It was far more devastating and eloquent if he did say so himself. "You really wanna do this, man? I mean, perps usually have a certain... je ne sais quoi, which I have to say, you lack. I think it might be the fact that they're normally out of school by the time they start doing illegal things."

"I-I... he went on a date with my girl."

"I did not! We're just friends, Finn, I swear," Kid-without-a-gun pleaded - was his name Jonah?

Peter couldn't remember. He struggled not to roll his eyes. This was such a... menial quibble. It was literally just who-kissed-who. He almost missed the days of HYDRA, where he was at least hunting down high-profile, dangerous, and therefore interesting people.

"No, I saw you kiss her, Jonah!" Oh, so Kid-without-a-gun *was* called Jonah.

"Yeah, on the cheek, which is what friends do!"

Peter had had enough of this. "Okay, okay, Finn, is that your name?" he broke in, interrupting their dispute. Finn nodded. "Here's what we're going to do. You're going to put that gun on the ground and kick it away. If you do that now, I won't call the police on you."

"And why should I do that? Why shouldn't I just shoot you right on the spot for sticking your nose where it doesn't belong?"

Peter snorted. "You can try, but seriously man, I wouldn't recommend it. You make the wrong decision now, and it will *ruin the rest of your life*, all for what? A bit of petty revenge?"

Finn hesitated, before placing the gun on the ground and nudging it away. Peter could feel the tension start to leak out of the air, and Jonah lowered his hands from where they'd been raised at shoulder-level.

He shot a web at the gun, pulling it towards him and snatching it out of the air before emptying the bullets onto the ground and crushing the firearm in one hand. The bullets made an odd tinkling sound as they fell to the ground, and he crushed those too, under his heel for good measure.

"Damn," Jonah whispered, and Peter looked up to see the guy staring at him with something akin to respect in his eyes.

"Okay, well..." Peter trailed off, feeling awkward now that the threat of a gun wasn't so imminent. "You guys can, yeah I don't know, chat this out? Maybe think about whether this girl is more important than... whatever you've got going on here." He winced. Ugh, sometimes he gave even himself a headache.

"Wait, dude, who are you? Genuinely?"

"Your friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man." It had slipped out when Ava's mother had asked who he was, and since he'd already dug himself into that hole, he figured it might just be easier to keep digging. Besides, it sounded kind of cool.

He jumped onto the wall and crawled away from the two guys, who had miraculously started talking to each other in a calm, rational manner about their issues.

Peter was beat. After hours of crime-fighting and shoe-finding, he needed a nap, and so he leapt off the side of the building, relishing in the feeling of cold air rushing past his face, and swung home to the Tower.

~~~

"Tony, I have a question for you."

Tony jumped, startled, at the sound of Pepper's voice, and abruptly dropped the slice of double

pepperoni pizza he was holding. Struggling to regain his cool, he quickly saved the food with his superhero-honed reflexes (which were admirable, but sadly outmatched by Peter's, something that had taken him months to admit and had resulted in a so-far never-ending round of bullying from Clint) and glanced up at her. She stood in the doorway of the kitchen, arms folded, the lines of her face grim with determination.

Ah. So clearly not a social visit.

"Questions? I love questions. Fire away," Tony quickly said, shoving an overly-large bite of pizza into his mouth in the hopes that he could stall for time with the pretence of struggling to chew through a gob of pepperoni and cheese, in the most likely event that Pepper asked him a difficult question. The non-answerable kind. Tony liked to think himself capable of concocting a witty response to any kind of query in existence - even the morbidly awkward ones about that minor event in which he'd set a robotic alter-ego of himself loose on an innocent city by mistake - but unfortunately, this genetically ingrained gift of his didn't extend to Pepper Potts, and it annoyed him to no end.

"Okay, Tony," Pepper continued, taking a step forward and looking more determined than ever. "I'll fire away."

The glare she was now projecting onto him was, quite simply put, murderous. In nervous anticipation, Tony hastily shovelled another piece of pizza into his mouth. She hadn't looked this pissed when he'd flooded an entire lower level of Stark Tower several years ago in an attempt to inflate some supposedly self-inflating water balloons. (As it turned out, they had been anything but.)

"Here's my question, Tony," Pepper continued, her glare more pronounced than ever. "Why is Peter in the living room with Clint and Natasha, happily engaging in Mario Kart and looking entirely, completely, utterly - *normal*?"

Oh, shit. This was going to be a problem.

"If by normal, you mean half constipated in adorable concentration, then yes, I'd allow that," Tony nodded. "And as long as he's winning. Is he winning?"

"He is indeed winning," Pepper said coolly, and somehow, the glare intensified. "Which only further extends the weight of my question. Why is Peter behaving normally, Tony? Would you care to explain why there is an inherent lack of erratic behaviour in Peter today?"

"The kid's always erratic," Tony shrugged in what he hoped was a casual manner, before hurriedly biting into a fresh slice of pizza. "Now, what would worry me is if you came and told me that he was sitting there, perfectly responsibly, not stealing a single bit of Sam's cooking or throwing a single cushion at Natasha's head to distract her. Is that what's happening here, Pep?"

If even possible, the glare escalated to a superhuman level. Pepper took another level step forward. "No, Tony. That is not what's happening."

Well. No better time to make a quick exit. "Excellent, then," Tony said, plastering a false grin onto his face. "Well, sounds like everything's just dandy. Business is booming, Peter is Petering, the team is...team-ering. And I happen to be suffering from a sudden and totally unprecedented episode of claustrophobia, which has never happened before, but I think it's something to do with this pizza, the crust is far too thick, it really leaves no room to breathe, so if you'll excuse me--"

He made a move to sidestep Pepper, but she moved sideways, blocking his path. Still glaring, she

gazed up at him intently.

“You didn’t tell him, did you?” she accused quietly.

“Didn’t tell who what? When I managed to refrain from telling Steve that he was wearing the same outfit as my great-great-grandma? I was rather proud of that.”

The intensity of Pepper’s glare was now shrivelling his very insides. Recoiling slightly, Tony quickly refocused his attention on the much more safe and much less threatening piece of pizza in his hand. Before he could take another distractory bite, however, Pepper snatched the crust out of his hand.

“Tony, quit playing around, or I swear to God I’ll go down there and tell the kid myself right now.”

Tony stared at her, hoping (rather fruitlessly) to see some small sign of humour in Pepper’s eyes. As predicted, there was none. She was looking as stern as ever, and for the millionth time in his life, he gave into that soul-crushing glare of hers.

“Okay. Fine. I admit it,” he admitted, sagging a little. “You got me. Busted.”

“Busted indeed,” Pepper repeated dryly, looking thoroughly exasperated. “Answer me this, Tony. Did you even go into that room? That night, when the adoption got approved? Did you even knock on the door?”

A smarter version of himself, perhaps, would have lied. Tried to minimize the extent of the damage. The current version of himself, however, was still locked under Pepper’s unbreakable glare, and he knew she’d smell out any attempt at deception faster than he could concoct one in the first place.

“Negative,” he said finally. “Thought the kid deserved some beauty sleep, you know?”

Pepper sighed, and abruptly tossed the slice of pizza in the kitchen bin. Tony would have expressed the mortal tragedy that this was in another situation, but as it was he was far too preoccupied with the colossal task of avoiding death-by-killer-glare.

“So, for the third week in a row since you came up with this *ingenious* idea, Peter is sitting in the communal area, happily playing Mario Kart and totally oblivious to the fact that you’re planning on becoming his *adoptive father*,” Pepper said, slowly and clearly. “See, Tony, what we’re currently experiencing? This is called an *issue*.”

“Unfortunately, I have to disagree. If it was an issue, money or a nice game of poker would have solved the problem by now.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and sighed exasperatedly. “You do realise, Tony, that there is this minorly inconvenient little concept called *deadlines*? Just because the application got approved, doesn’t mean you can kick back with your whiskey and ogle over Phoebe in *Friends* indefinitely. You have to book an interview by next month, and since Peter has to be a willing and active participant of that interview, I’d suggest you get onto the slightly pressing task of *telling him the news*.”

Tony sighed, rubbing his face tiredly as the weight - and unfortunate truth - of her words sank in. “Yeah, right. Okay. Tell the kid - that, I can do.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow. “Really? Because for someone who claims to be so attached to him, you’re taking an awfully long time to say the words to his face. You told me, back when you first had the idea for the adoption, that you were worried you wouldn’t be a decent father to Peter. That

you'd be incapable, too lazy, too stuck in your own head to do anything good for him. And do you not remember me, explicitly telling you, that you would be better than that? I put my faith in you, Tony, because I *know* you're better than this. But right now, if you continue down this path, you're just fulfilling your own prediction. So do something about it."

And with that, she turned and walked away, leaving Tony with nothing but the weight of both his half-digested double pepperoni pizza and his own troubled thoughts.

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Two days after what Tony was now internally referring to as the Chicken Incident - the night when he'd totally chickened out on telling Peter about the adoption - Tony was moping in his workshop, absent-mindedly banging on a piece of warped steel. The material had originally been intended for a new suit he was creating, but due to the chaotic nature of his thoughts, he'd lost track of what he was doing and the metal in question was now serving as more of a release for all of his pent up aggression than anything else.

Tony had just abandoned his banging and promptly moved onto stacking the multiple pieces of battered metal on top of each other like building blocks when a familiar voice interrupted.

"Uh, Tony, is this some secret Lego-building simulation obsession you've got here? Because if so, I am totally offended that you didn't tell me first and also demand that you come and build my new *Star Wars* Lego set - the Death Star one that you got me - ASAP. Like, right now."

Tony grinned, not needing to turn around to identify his intruder but doing so anyway. Peter stood in the doorway, and Tony felt a wave of deeply-rooted affection at the familiar sight of the kid - the endearing eyes, the messy curls, the contagious smile. Everything about him screamed comforting and happy, and it never failed to ease Tony's long list of stressors. Even in the case of today, when the main panic-attack factor was centred around Peter himself.

"Relax, kiddo," Tony told Peter, as the kid walked forwards to inspect his crude creation more closely. "If for some reason I'd been possessed by an evil, Satanic demon and did go all Luke Skywalker fanboy on you, you can be sure I'd have Pepper beating the geek-freak out of me faster than you can say *lightsaber*."

"Well then, what's with the beating up of innocent metal?" Peter asked, gesturing to the teetering pile of steel. "I mean, I get the temptation of beating the shit out of stuff, I really do, but you have so many other options before you. Barnaby. A pillow. Clint. Steve."

Tony smirked. "I was about to kill you for suggesting the first one, but you more than redeemed yourself with the last two. Consider yourself lucky to be alive."

"Wow, I'm terrified, totally," Peter grinned, fake-shivering. "You're a real intimidating dude sometimes, Tony. Especially with all that *threatening* body mass - I mean, what are your scary-AF measurements again? Five foot...five? Six?"

"Oh, you did not just attack my stature," Tony scowled. "It's five foot nine, for you information, and I'd watch it, bud, 'cause I still *tower* over you. You quiver in your boots at the mere shadow of me."

"If you wanna compare these fresh Nikes to some lame-ass boots, then we can't be friends anymore. Also, I'd be the one watching it, because Mr-Quiver over here is only fifteen, and by the time I'm fully grown I'd bet your entire Nutrigrain supply that you have to crane your neck backwards just to see my face."

“Unless - plot twist - you’re already fully grown,” Tony shot back teasingly. “You never know, kid. Some guys have the unfortunate curse of being early bloomers. If I were you, I’d get ready for a life in the realm of weed-dom.”

Peter shrugged. “Whatever. If I do get stuck in that realm, at least I’ll have you for company.”

“Okay, that’s twice my stature has been attacked in the same minute,” Tony announced. “This is where I draw the line. I’m officially pissed. Start baking me some raspberry cookies or something, kid. Go repent your sins. Say a few Hail Mary’s. I’ll talk to you again when you’ve realised the error of your ways.”

“Actually, that kinda doesn’t work with my schedule,” Peter grinned in return. “Don’t get me wrong, I love watching you embrace your inner Lego Star Wars nerd, and all, but I came down here with demands. I’m bored, and it’s late, and I can’t sleep. Start reading me *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at Peter. “Kid, did you just...give me orders? In my own workshop?”

“I like to think of it more as saving those pieces of steel from being bashed into metal pancakes,” Peter shrugged. “Now come on. I don’t take no for an answer.”

Tony sighed, but couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across his face as he allowed Peter to drag him away to his room. The kid’s energy and enthusiasm was infectious, as always, and Tony was soon engaging in an animated reading of the first few chapters of *The Deathly Hallows*, pausing to allow Peter time for a proper melodramatic reaction in all the right places. Despite his pretence of annoyance, he couldn’t deny that it was therapeutic - just sitting there and reading, allowing Peter’s innately happy nature, which had been even more exuberant of late, to wash away all the worries about adoptions and legal riff-raff and interviews. They were just making their way into Chapter Four of the book when Peter’s phone dinged, abruptly cutting off Tony’s excellent impression of Fleur Delacour.

“Wow kid, I see you’ve finally developed a social life,” Tony commented as Peter skim-read a series of texts on his phone. “Who’s the contact? Bro or boo? Or both? Is that a kissing icon I see in your recently used emojis?”

Peter looked up from the phone and rolled his eyes. “It’s a fucking Darth Vader emoji, Tony. Honestly, go re-watch *Star Wars* and educate yourself.”

“Nope, not moving,” Tony refused. “You’ve sparked my curiosity, kid. Now you’ve got to deal with the fire that will ensue. Who’s the secret girlfriend? Not a brain-blended assassin from your angsty past at HYDRA, I hope?”

“No, all the girls I saw there were ugly anyways,” Peter muttered off-handedly, causing Tony to snort. He thumbed a quick reply to the mystery contact in his phone before affording Tony his full attention. “And it’s not a boo or a girlfriend. It’s just...well, I guess you’d just call it...a friend.”

“A *friend*?” Tony repeated, arching his eyebrow. “Well, I guess I should be relieved we’re keeping it nice and clean, PG-13 and all that, but I gotta state the obvious, kid: since when the fuck did you have friends?”

“Since I went shopping with Thor,” Peter explained, running a hand through his hair, and Tony realised that the kid was exuding an uncharacteristic awkwardness. Not negatively - the excitement was practically bubbling off him - but surrounding that, a layer of nervousness. Clearly, this was something he’d been wanting to tell Tony for a while.



“What, the one time I don’t go shopping with you and some actual shit goes down?” Tony complained. “This is the biggest joke. So who’s the kid, kid? Come on, give a guy some deets. A name, for a start.”

“His name’s Ned,” Peter rushed to explain. “And I met him at the food court, while Thor was buying something to eat. I’d just found a seat, and then Ned came and asked to sit with me ‘cause everywhere else was taken. And we started talking about stuff, like school and things - I told him I was homeschooled, and I never mentioned you guys, don’t worry...” The enthusiasm was building in Peter’s voice now, his words speeding up as he got carried away with his own story. “And we talked about *Star Wars*, which you better not bully me for, but Ned loves it too, and we talked about the new Lego set for it, and I told him how I have it, and we exchanged numbers, and we’ve been texting ever since, and - yeah.” The story at an abrupt end, Peter broke off, his eyes alight with excitement.

God, Tony loved it when the kid got enthusiastic. It was really fucking adorable.

He had no intention of voicing these feelings, however. Instead, he raised an eyebrow. “So you had your first social interaction with someone that wasn’t wildly outside of your age group, and *didn’t* think to fill me in on the hot goss? I gotta admit, Pete, I’m offended. This is a crucial milestone to your development as a weedy adolescent. The betrayal *stings*.”

Peter grinned. “Yeah, speaking of betrayal...hope you don’t mind going through it a second time. ‘Cause Ned’s just asked me to come over to his house, and he wants me to bring my Death Star set so we can build it together.”

“You’re saying I’ve been replaced?” Tony repeated, gasping in mock horror. “Oh, now the betrayal positively *burns*. I’m being ditched for a boy named Ned. Rest in peace, Tony Stark’s dignity.”

“I’m gonna tell Ned you dissed his name,” Peter teased, grinning. “Assuming I can go. Which I’m guessing I can? Right? Right? Ned’s, like, a harmless marshmallow, it’s definitely less risky going to his house than staying at the Tower itself, which is kinda just a magnet for trouble, and no way would HYDRA expect me to be building Lego with a random Midtown kid-”

“Whoa, kiddo, slow down, untwist those stripy boxers of yours,” Tony interrupted, smiling. “As much as the betrayal still pains me, I give my blessing for you to replace me for this Ned-boy. He better be one hell of a *Star Wars* nerd if you’re willingly choosing to spend time with him over me, myself and I.”

“Yes!” Peter exclaimed, his features extending into another contagious grin. “Thanks so much, man of short stature. Can I go tomorrow?”

“For that third comment on the sensitive topic of my stature, most definitely. I need you out of the house ASAP before I throw my Lego-tower of steel at you.”

“Cool,” Peter grinned.

“Cool it is, kiddo.”

And as they returned to their reading of *The Deathly Hallows*, pausing only to allow Peter to briefly compose a text of acceptance to Ned’s offer, Tony felt it growing within him, inch by painstaking inch. It wasn’t impulsive, this time. It wasn’t born out of apprehension and excitement. It wasn’t there in one instant, gone the next.

It was real, and it wasn't going anywhere.

He was going to tell Peter about the adoption.

He loved the kid too fucking much to put it off any longer.

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Honestly, Peter was surprised Tony let him go to Ned's.

Like, *Peter* knew that Ned was a harmless marshmallow that wasn't capable of hurting anyone, but Tony didn't know that because he hadn't even met the guy. And Mr 'Protective-and-Paranoid-will-be-the-title-of-my-autobiography' Stark didn't seem like the type of guy to just go off other people's word when it came to the safety of his loved ones.

So, to wrap up his mini TED Talk, the man was definitely up to something, but Peter just hoped it was a good something because he didn't have time to worry about it.

It had been a week since he first went out as Spider-Man. He'd gone out a few more times after that, and he'd already seen himself on the news on more than one occasion. He was pretty sure Nat had noticed that something was up when he'd lunged for the remote to change the channel when he saw shaky footage of a red and blue figure swinging through the streets of Queens.

But apart from that small slip-up, he'd helped so many people and the Avengers were none the wiser, just the way he liked it.

"Hey, Happy, thanks for taking me to Ned's," Peter said, grinning obnoxiously just to annoy the not-so-happy man as he slid into the back seat of the subtlest car Tony owned (there was no way Peter was going to roll up at Ned's house in the bright orange Ferrari that Tony had tried to convince him to take).

"It's my job, kid," the man replied, sounding typically unenthusiastic about his own statements. Long ago, Peter would've been hurt by Happy's curtness, but he'd learnt that it was part of his personality. Besides, it made teasing him all the more enjoyable.

They pulled out of the underground parking garage, and Peter tapped out a message to Ned, telling him to 'buckle the fuck up because I'm on my way'. The Death Star Lego set was lying on the seat next to him, and Peter chuckled at the thought of Tony's betrayed expression from last night when he learnt that he'd been replaced. The man had emerged from the dark recesses of his lab that morning to say goodbye, and he'd been oddly twitchy, but Peter just passed it off as an excess of caffeine and a little nervousness about the fact that Peter was venturing outside.

He also remembered Tony's face when he told him that he'd made a friend. The happiness, the pride that had shone through, despite the jokingly betrayed exterior - it made Peter feel all glowy inside and he struggled not to barf as he realised how sappy he sounded. There was a difference between wishing for the one man that could make him feel safe when he was being tortured and like, three seconds away from death, and feeling happy when that one man was proud of him for making a friend his own age. Somehow, the former just sounded less prissy.

However, he was glad he wasn't the emotionless robot from his HYDRA days either, because that had sucked immensely.

Before he knew it, Happy was pulling up to a small but tidy house in Forest Hills, Queens, and Peter recognised it as the address Ned had sent him when he'd confirmed he could come over. He could see an excited Ned standing on his front porch, his mouth hanging open as he took in the sleek, black Rolls-Royce that Peter got out of, waving at Happy as the man sped away, off to do God-knew-what while he waited for Peter to finish his 'play-date' (christened so by Clint - that man was the master of terrible names).

"Damn, dude. That's a sick car," Ned said appreciatively, before he got distracted by the massive box Peter was carrying under his arm. "Oh my God! Is that the Death Star? Lemme see! Oh, it's beautiful," Ned gasped, his words rocketing out so fast Peter almost couldn't keep up.

He laughed. "I know, right? Four thousand plus pieces."

"Dude," Ned blew out a breath, his eyes scanning over the picture on the front of the box. He seemed to physically shake himself out of the stupor, before saying, "Oh my God, sorry. Come inside! My dad's on a conference call right now, but my mum's so excited to meet you! She's *so* happy that I finally have a friend, you have *no idea* how high-pitched her squeal was when I asked her if you could come over."

Ned ushered him inside, and Peter grinned as he stepped over the threshold. He'd never been in a normal house before. All the targets he'd had at HYDRA had been high profile, so their houses had been something akin to mansions, and then he'd lived on the streets for six months - not very many houses there. His next dwelling had been the Tower - enough said. But Ned's house, with its cream-coloured walls, dark wooden furniture, the colourful rugs and blankets scattered throughout the home, and the delicious smell of food permeating the air, wasn't just a house. It was a home.

"Woah, what's that smell? It's so good!"

A small, round woman with flowing black hair rounded the corner, her arms extended in front of her before she tugged Peter into a tight hug. He could only assume she was Ned's mother. "Hello Peter! It is so wonderful to have you! That's my casserole, darling boy. Are you allergic to anything? Peanut butter? Egg?" She paused, rubbing her hands up and down his arms. "Rice?"

Peter laughed at the mortified look on Ned's face. "Not that I know of, Mrs Leeds."

"Oh, that's a relief. Please, call me Joanne. If you need anything at all just ask. Lunch will be in a few hours - do you want something to tide you over until then? I have popcorn in case you boys want to watch a movie."

"Mum, stop harassing Peter. We're good. We're just going upstairs to build some Lego."

Mrs Leeds smiled at the two of them before turning and bustling off, yelling, "be good!" over her shoulder as she went.

Ned flushed a brilliant scarlet as he led Peter up the stairs to his room, passing an open door where a man was on what looked like FaceTime, talking about something computery. He turned on his roly chair when they passed and gave them a wave and a smile.

"That's my dad," Ned explained, though it wasn't really necessary. Peter, the genius that he was, had managed to put two and two together.

Ned's room was awesome, covered from floor to ceiling with Star Wars and Avengers merchandise (Peter struggled not to laugh at the sight of the little Avengers figurines Ned had, where everyone was in ridiculously cool poses. It was hard to reconcile them with the image he had of the team lounging around in the common room, hurling insults at some stupid movie on the TV). Even Ned's bedspread was Star Wars themed.

They spent hours building the Death Star and discussing everything from school (Ned was amazed when he learnt that Peter had read Bruce Banner's papers - "I could barely understand half of what the brilliant guy was talking about. Though, I guess computers are more my scene. See, this is why we need you on AcaDec!"), to which was the best Star Wars film (They both agreed that A New Hope was the best plot-wise, but they were divided on which was better, aesthetically. Peter thought the title belonged to The Empire Strikes back, but Ned was adamant that The Phantom Menace deserved some recognition).

At some point, Ned's mum came in to deliver a bowl of hummus and various things that could be dipped in it, as well as a packet of M&M's, and she laughed when she saw the two boys, sprawled on the floor, surrounded by thousands of pieces of Lego and furiously debating the topic of 'who's the best Avenger?' Ned said it was obviously Iron Man, because he'd made himself a superhero with his genius, no powers necessary. Secretly, Peter agreed with him, but he couldn't let Tony know that, and the man had eyes and ears everywhere - he wouldn't be surprised if Tony had somehow slipped a microphone and tracking device into his backpack when he gave him a hug before he left this morning - so he claimed that the Black Widow was the best, because she was cool as fuck, and the only woman 'officially' part of the group.

They were called down for lunch about an hour later, and Ned's dad had wrapped up his conference call by then, so they'd all sat at the dining table and eaten numerous bowls of Mrs Leeds' casserole (it had been so good, better than anything Sam had ever made, and that was saying something, because he'd once slow-cooked an amazing beef brisket).

They decided to give their aching backs and fingers a break from Lego once lunch was finished, and settled down in Ned's living room to watch A New Hope. Did they end up making cynical comments the entire way through instead of actually watching the movie because they'd both seen it so many times they could (and did) quote it word for word? Yes. But it was fine because they were both so hyped up on sugar that everything was funny.

After walking in on them laughing ridiculously hard about the fact that there was an actual man inside R2-D2, Ned's mum not-so-subtly suggested they go for a walk through the park near Ned's house, saying they could probably use a bit of fresh air.

As they stepped outside, Peter suppressed a shiver. After a string of gloomy days and overcast skies, the sun had finally made an appearance over New York, but it was still cold as fuck, so he zipped his jacket up and shoved his hands into his pockets.

Meandering vaguely towards the park, Ned re-started their conversation about the Avengers. Peter was halfway through explaining his side (for what felt like the fourth time - they kept going over it again and again), when Ned said, "Dude, oh my God, I can't believe I forgot! Have you seen the news lately?"

Peter stopped, confused by the sudden topic change and a little disgruntled that Ned had cut off his epic point about how the Black Widow was a literal spy, and therefore totally awesome. "Uh, that's kind of vague, don't you think? I mean there's a lot of stuff going on all the time."

"Peter, seriously, shut up. You sound so boring right now. I'm talking about the fact that Queens has this new vigilante dude! He literally swings around on like, webs or something, and beats up bad guys. And he's so good at it too - like I watched this clip of him on YouTube. It was a little blurry but he totally wiped out this random guy who was trying to rob a store, and he did it in like, two seconds."

Peter nearly choked on his own saliva. Ned was talking about *him* like he was some sort of *God*, using the same reverent tone he employed when he obsessed over the Avengers. It was insane.

“Uh, no-no, I don’t think I’ve, uh, heard of that guy.”

“Yeah he just popped up out of nowhere, I swear. But he’s doing really good work. He’s only been active for a week and he’s saved tons of people, and there’s been barely any property damage. None at all, I think, except for a random window. That’s what’s made him so popular among all the adults. The Battle of New York was awesome, and most people are really happy the Avengers saved the day and all, but they caused billions of dollars in property damage. Or at least, that’s what my dad said last night. Honestly, I just think he’s awesome ‘cause of his moves and the fact that he swings around on literal webs.”

Of course, Peter knew all that - he’d *been* there, for Christ’s sake - but it was different coming from Ned. Ned knew him - he wasn’t a stranger, he was Peter’s (best?) friend. Hearing that he was awesome from Ned felt just as amazing as Tony telling him he was proud of him - there was the warm glowy feeling in his chest and it was like he was walking on air.

But of course, that could never last. He heard a yell for help somewhere between the trees lining the path he and Ned were trudging along, and his mind flashed back to the day the Avengers had gone to the park. The lady that had been there. The man that had tried to rob her.

Why did everything sucky have to happen at the park? Parks were nice!

He took off running (again), ignoring Ned’s confused cries as he followed the sounds of distress. He could hear Ned’s footsteps following him, and he turned around briefly to yell, “stay there!” before continuing his sprint towards whoever needed help. He’d be damned if Ned got hurt in this altercation right after he’d sung Peter’s praises, even if he hadn’t known he’d been doing it.

He found two men wrestling in the slushy, half-melted snow on the ground, and the patheticness of the scene almost made him laugh. Almost.

One of the guys, who Peter was pretty sure was the victim, yelled “I command that you stop, this is a Gucci wallet, you heathen,” officially making the situation comical enough to force a soft laugh out of Peter.

But then the other dude was pulling out a gun from within the deep recesses of his black jacket (why was it always black? Couldn’t they choose a colour with more pep?) and Peter decided it was probably time to intervene.

He didn’t bother with any snappy one-liners or negotiation, because the guy with the gun looked desperate and angry, which meant he was one wrong move away from firing.

So Peter didn’t give him time to see his move, let alone process it. He went straight in with a flying kick that Ned would have loved if he’d been there to witness it, knocking the gun right out of his hands. The man startled, his fingers tightening around a trigger that was no longer in his grasp and Peter downed him with a swift kick to the back of his knee. The guy with the Gucci wallet had run off as soon as he’d sensed he was no longer in danger (huh, so much for gratitude. Rich snob), and so Peter thought it was safe for him to engage his web shooters and restrain the guy, who was groggy but still conscious.

The key word though, was *thought* .

Because, as it turned out, adrenaline made him hyper-focus on one particular thing, so all of his senses were directed at that. Which meant that he hadn’t noticed Ned.

“What the fuck, Peter,” the boy whispered, but, courtesy of his enhanced senses, Peter heard him.

He whipped around, taking in the pale face of his friend, who was half-hiding behind a tree. Ned obviously hadn't listened when Peter told him to stay, and honestly, he couldn't blame him. If his friend had randomly run off at the sound of a distress cry, stopping only to tell him to stay where he was, well, he'd have followed too.

"You're the Spider-Man," Ned took a quick, stuttering breath, eyes widening with disbelief, "from YouTube."

Well, shit. He'd always thought he was a good liar, but the evidence was starting to pile up against him. "I'm not, I'm not." *Outright denial, nice job, dimwit. Not even an excuse handy.*

"You just *shot webs* at that dude!" Ned replied, pointing a shaking finger at the webbed up would-be mugger. Of course he'd be all calm and logical in this situation while Peter fell apart at the seams. He hadn't even been able to keep it a proper secret for longer than a week.

"No I didn't, what are you doing here?"

"You can't just tell me to stay and then run off. I'm not a dog!"

"You can't just follow me when I tell you to stay where you are!"

"Well, I did, and now I know that you're Spider-Man. *Holy shit*, dude!" Ned looked like he was three seconds away from freaking out, and Peter was right behind him.

"Oh my God, my best friend is Spider-Man... and I ranted to him for ten minutes about how awesome Spider-Man is," Ned muttered, his hands fisting in his hair.

Peter ignored the curl of pleasure in his belly as Ned called him his best friend, and ran over to the other boy. "Ned, you can't tell anyone, okay? Not a single person."

"No one knows?"

"No! No one knows, and we've gotta keep it that way. C'mon, Ned. Please."

"Ok. Ok, ok, ok, ok, ok. I'll level with you. I don't think I can keep this a secret, this is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me!"

"No, Ned, c'mon. No one can know, because if they do what'll happen to my family? If people know my identity, they'll know my family's, and they've done so much for me. I can't put them in danger like that."

"I don't know, Peter, this is big, this is dangerously big. You could get hurt."

"I've got powers, Ned. I'll be fine." Peter could still see a hint of hesitancy behind the shroud of awe in Ned's gaze. Time to drop the pity bomb. "Ned, there's something I haven't told you about me yet."

"More? Seriously? How many secrets have you got, dude?"

More than you could possibly fathom. "I, uh, I'm a foster kid, okay? I - well, the family I'm with now is, honestly, the best thing that's ever happened to me. They saw me in the... situation I was in and gave me a chance when no one else would. Please, Ned, I can't do this to them, I can't betray their trust like this."

Ned's eyes softened, and he sighed in reluctant agreement. "Okay."

Peter, still jittery from the attempted-mugging and the fiasco that followed, wasn't appeased. "Just, swear it, okay?"

"I swear."

"Thank you," Peter sighed, relieved.

"Yeah."

And then reality crashed onto Peter's shoulders, and he turned away, running his hands through his hair. He realised that they were shaking minutely, but he couldn't really bring himself to care.

"God, I can't believe this is happening right now," he muttered to himself.

Then Ned, ever the optimist, completely changed the topic. "Can I try the suit on?"

"No," Peter snapped, immediately feeling guilty but still way too wired to apologise. It didn't seem to deter Ned though.

"How does it work? Is it magnets? How do you shoot the webs?"

"I-uh. No, I've got sticky fingers, I guess. And the webs are artificial. They come from these web shooters I made."

"Wicked," Ned breathed as he observed the grey metal wrapped around Peter's wrists.

~~~

Ned pestered him with questions on the entire walk home, and Peter couldn't even bring himself to be mad. Ned had found out because Peter hadn't been cautious enough, and he couldn't blame the guy for being curious about something that was his own damn mistake anyway.

"A spider bit you? Can it bite me? Well, it probably would've hurt, right? You know what, whatever, even if it did hurt, I would let it bite me. Maybe. How much did it hurt?"

"The spider's dead, Ned."

"Oh." Ned at least had the tact to notice Peter was very clearly uncomfortable with that particular topic. In fact, he was struggling to push back the tide of memories as they sunk their stupid little hooks into his skin.

"Wait, dude, you saved a person's *life*. That guy had a gun, you could've *died*."

They walked in somber silence for a moment, and for the first time Peter was really thinking about what would happen to everyone in his life if something went terribly wrong while he was on patrol.

"Do you lay eggs?" Ned asked, and Peter shot him a weird look, before bursting into belly-shaking laughter.

"What? No," he wheezed as he wiped tears from his eyes.

"Can you spit venom?"

"Nope."

"Can you summon an army of spiders?"

"No, Ned," Peter sighed, struggling to remain calm as the ridiculousness of the conversation

increased.

“How far can you shoot your webs?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never tested it.”

“Really? If I was you I’d stand on the edge of a building and just shoot it as far as I could.”

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The time had come for Peter to go home. Happy was waiting outside, probably impatiently, as Ned helped Peter pack up his bag. Peter had said Ned could keep the Death Star Lego set at his house as long as he didn’t build it without Peter, to which Ned had replied, “Build it without you? Who do you think I am?”

Peter had thanked Ned’s mother for her amazing food and hospitality, and Ned had told him that she probably loved Peter more than she loved Ned. For some reason, that felt like the best compliment he’d ever been given. Maybe that was what prompted him to throw any secrets he had left to the wind.

“Oh, dude, in the interest of not having any secrets between us...” Peter paused and leant in under the guise of giving Ned a hug. “The Avengers are my foster family.”

Peter felt the other boy jerk back in surprise, his eyes even wider than when he’d discovered Peter was Spider-Man. “What the *fu-* ”

~~~

Once he got past the crushing betrayal that Peter was ditching the pleasure of his intellectual company for a fifteen-year-old *Star Wars* freak, Tony had to admit that there were several benefits.

Number one. The kid had, apparently, finally taken it upon himself to develop a social life. As much as he endorsed the Avengers becoming Peter’s replacement family, he couldn’t deny that it was far from healthy for any developing teenager to be spending all of his time interacting with people twice his age. The kid was in desperate need of a few good old-fashioned play dates with some other young hooligans, although Tony shuddered to think how insufferable the kid’s already painful Gen Z-language would become once he spent a significant amount of time with his fellow generational buddies.

Or buddy, really. Only one buddy. But that was better than no buddy. In fact, in the case of Peter, baby steps were the perfect route forward to success. It had worked with Sam’s therapy, it had worked when they’d tried to overcome his HYDRA past, and Tony didn’t doubt that it would work again.

Number two was slightly more humiliating, purely because some unapologetic Googling had been involved. Yes, so as soon as Peter had left for this Ned person’s house, Tony may or may not have shut himself in his lab and commenced a frantic scouring of the Inter-webs, disguising the essence of his mission with elaborate search terms and would-be legal processes, when in fact he was, for all intents and purposes, stalking Ned Leeds. Tony knew full well that Pepper would have been rolling her eyes if she’d caught him in this process - luckily for him, though, she’d been out getting a manicure with Wanda.



And Tony had to admit - after a long session of only-slightly-creepy stalking, he no longer had any right to question Peter's friendship with Ned Leeds. The boy was a good kid. He attended Midtown - a prestigious school renowned for bursting at the seams with budding prodigies - so that ruled out the risk of Peter mingling with brainless stoners, at the very least. Based on a few photos he'd seen on Ned's mum's Facebook, the kid was obviously very academically inclined - he was in the school Decathlon team, and had won numerous awards at school assemblies for excelling in science, maths and, most admirably of all, digital technologies. If there was one way to gain Tony Stark's respect, it was by knowing your bits from your bytes.

Plus, all judgement aside, Peter's assessment had proven to be entirely accurate - Tony had never seen a more harmless, albeit extremely intelligent, marshmallow in his life. He supposed the shared enthusiasm with Peter for building a Lego Death Star should have been a massive warning sign.

But perhaps the best of the benefits provided by Peter's newfound friendship with Ned Leeds was that it gave Tony a whole eight hours free of the kid's company. Or more specifically - a whole eight hours to drop the adoption news to the Avengers.

Well, he now only had six left. Stalking Peter's bro-slash-still-possible-boo had eaten into the allotted time slightly. But Tony considered the cause worthy enough to brush this slight setback aside.

Whether telling the Avengers about the adoption before Peter was fair, he didn't know. They were Peter's replacement family, and Tony's too, he supposed, and had thus earned the right to know about (most) of Tony's private affairs, but then again, since Peter was literally the object of concern when it came to this particular matter, it felt slightly counter-intuitive to be confessing the matter to just about every damned member of Tony's family except the kid who was actually (hopefully) going to be adopted. Still, he'd brought the situation on himself, and at any rate, dropping the news to the Avengers would come with its own fair share of benefits. For one thing, he'd create an accountability for himself - by telling the Avengers that he was going to adopt Peter, it would ensure that he did, in fact, follow through with the plan, since Tony would rather pitch himself into the fires of Hell themselves than prove himself wrong in front of Natasha Romanov. And Tony didn't have any intentions of chickening out this time, at any rate, but his record was against him. Telling the team would seal the deal, as a manner of speaking. Force his commitment, which was something that he was entirely unused to. But given the circumstances, he felt it was necessary.

Plus, if the team knew about the whole adoption situation before Tony told Peter himself, he'd at least have some backup to rely on if the kid took the news...badly. Not that Tony expected Peter to blatantly refuse the offer - he had more faith in the kid than *that* - but Tony knew all too well himself how a highly emotional and uncomfortably impactful decision could morph someone's true desires and feelings into something unnecessarily negative. Hadn't he gone through the exact same thing, these last three weeks, battling with himself about telling Peter and going through with the adoption at all? It hadn't been because he didn't *want* to go through with it - he'd known, deep down, since the epiphany he'd experienced during Peter's haircut, that adoption was the only way forward he'd be satisfied with. But the emotional weight of that decision had scared him, caused him to lash out and act counterproductively. It would be completely reasonable for Peter to react in a similar manner, no matter how much he really *did* want to be adopted.

Which Tony was assuming he did. Of course he did. Why wouldn't he want an adoptive father, right? Wasn't that what the orphaned kid always wanted, in the books and movies? Harry Potter had been so desperate for paternal love, he'd agreed to come and live with a highly unstable man who he'd known for less than ten minutes and, prior to those ten minutes of knowing him, had

believed him to be a world-class murderous criminal. Kids without parents craved parental love.

It was something that he himself knew to be true.

*Yeah, yeah, go and wallow in self-pity why don't you. We all know the real issue here; the fact that you can't be a good father for shit-*

Tony hurriedly stood up, shaking these troubled thoughts out of his mind.

So. Telling the team would give him an incentive to do the same for Peter, and provide an extra buffer of help if he needed it down the track. And he was entirely sure that if he didn't tell the team before revealing the news to Peter, they'd find out within a couple of minutes anyway, largely thanks to the kid's well-honed blabbermouth. Peter couldn't keep a secret for shit.

Comforting himself with this knowledge, Tony took a deep breath and steeled himself for what was sure to be a very painful interaction with the team. He'd have to make a conscious effort not to launch into another hypothetical scenario lecture. Natasha was nowhere near as tolerant as Pepper Potts, and she'd throw something at him within seconds if he pulled out any sort of bullshit.

No, the truth was the way to go. Nice and simple. The honest, ugly truth.

*How hard can it be?*

~~~

Four hours later, the Avengers were gathered in the communal area, happily indulging in takeaway Chinese and watching Tony expectantly.

"So?" Clint demanded through a mouthful of rice. "What's the occasion, my guy? If it's any sort of challenge declaration, I accept immediately. I'm still coming for you and the kid in Mario Kart."

"Just the kid," Natasha corrected him dryly. "Don't give Tony anymore credit than he deserves. *He* was overthrown by you a long time ago."

"Oh, right, I totally forgot," Clint muttered, waving his fork dismissively. "Must have something to do with the fact that you two have literally become Siamese twins. Remind me, was it you or the kid that I walked in on during a solo *Just Dance* dance-off the other day?"

"That would have been Peter, obviously," Tony scoffed, as he scooped sweet and sour pork onto a plate. "I have slightly more finesse than *that*."

"Dunno, Tony," Clint countered, raising an eyebrow. "Kid had some moves. Those hips were *slaying* it in *Blame it on the Boogie*."

"Which you only know about because you joined in," Rhodey pointed out. "If you're gonna expose Peter, Clint, may as well stick to your guns and tell the whole sticky story. Like how I found you both, half an hour later, engaged in a very *intimate* recreation of the *Careless Whisper* waltz the two characters were performing on screen? Those dips you did together...flawless." He blew a chef's kiss for special effect.

"See, this is your issue, Rhodes," Clint protested, shovelling another forkful of rice into his mouth. "You act like that's actually gonna...I dunno, *humiliate* me, or something. I fully own that dance. Me and Peter killed it. He's a natural for the whole romantic waltz thing."

"Yes, and when combined with your *suave* talents, I'm sure it was a flawlessly coordinated affair,"

Wanda chimed in, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“You doubting me, Maximoff? Why don’t we go turn on the Wii, you can see my recreation for yourself?”

“Because I would take absolutely no pleasure in being forced to waltz with you, and my spring rolls are much more tempting, thanks.”

“They are really addictive, I have to admit,” Steve mumbled through a mouthful of food. “Tony, you better tell us your news fast, before I give myself indigestion.”

Tony hesitated, choosing instead to devote his focus on enjoying a particularly delectable bite of sweet and sour pork. The Avengers, naturally, interpreted his silence as a cue to take matters into their own hands.

“Oh, he’s gone quiet,” Natasha observed. “It *must* be bad.”

“Go on, Tony, spit it out,” Bucky smirked. “What have you done this time?”

“Did you set fire to my lab again?” Bruce asked.

“Is there some rogue suit tearing up your workshop downstairs?” Rhodey guessed.

“Did you write *I Love Iron Man* on my chef’s apron, or something?” Sam accused. “Because if you did, fair warning, I will kill you.”

“No, come on, guys, you’re all thinking too...lightly,” Clint interrupted, waving his fork knowingly at Tony’s face. “That look right there, that is the look of a guilty man. I see Pepper is out - come on, spill the beans, time to tell us about the secret daughter you were not aware existed until now.”

Tony scowled and threw a prawn cracker at Clint, who promptly caught it and stuffed it into his mouth.

“Oh, lovely, Barton,” he glared. “It’s reassuring to know you have so much faith in me.”

Clint raised his hands defensively. “Well, what are we supposed to think?” he protested, bits of rice flying out of his mouth as he spoke. “You’re sitting there all mute and unmoving, which is entirely too disturbing in itself, and you’ve summoned us here for some big reveal of information? If you don’t start talking soon, buddy, the assumptions are only gonna get worse - and dare I say it, more *accurate* -”

“Alright, fine, I’m talking,” Tony interrupted irritably. “God, trust you to cut off my moment of suspense. I *was* working up to it, but looks like the vibe has, in essence, been ruined. Nice one, Clint.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Tony,” Natasha interjected, rolling her eyes. “I’ve never seen a bigger case of *stalling-for-time* in my life.”

“Jeez,” Tony complained. “Remind me how I’ve been living with you guys again? You really are a suffocating bunch.”

“You can take a vacation with me to Asgard, if you want,” Thor offered casually, as though his suggestion was nothing more than a throwaway comment about the weather.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m not really in the mood for a bout of intergalactic travel,” Tony

grumbled, stabbing restlessly at his dumpling. “Right. Okay. I’m speaking now, only because you guys have bullied me into it. I *do not* forgive you for this, by the way. And I expect relief from all my kitchen duties for the new two months as penance.”

Steve stared at him in disbelief. “Tony, you’re *literally the one who wanted to speak in the first place-*”

“Silence, artefact,” Tony interrupted, raising a dismissive hand. “I don’t have time to oil your rusty hinges at the present. Now, onto the matter of this...gathering.”

He took a risk and allowed himself one moment of deliberation, on the pretence of shovelling a dumpling into his mouth. He’d captured the team’s attention, now, so much so that Steve hadn’t even bothered to retort to the insult. Tony knew he should have felt satisfaction, should have enjoyed the rare moment in which he got the last say with Steve Rogers. As it was, all he felt was restless uneasiness. This had been hard enough when it was just Pepper.

No Bob and Jeff, remember. In the interest of avoiding a concussion from Natasha’s plate.

“Okay, so,” Tony began, clearing his throat hesitantly. “In light of recent events, I’ve been...thinking.”

“Well, that’s certainly a welcome change from your usual lack thereof,” Natasha muttered pointedly.

Tony shot her a glare. “None of that, Romanov. Just because my usual supply of witty comebacks has been somewhat incapacitated by the current serious nature of what I’m about to reveal to you, doesn’t mean you get a free pass to attack me.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows. “Oh, says the man who just made the oldest joke of the century to Steve not five seconds ago? Pot calling the kettle black, Tony.”

“Well, Steve *is* the oldest joke of the century, so it cancels out,” Tony rattled off, “and besides-”

“The oldest joke of the century is, in fact, in possession of a pair of ears,” Steve interrupted in annoyance. “Just thought I’d remind you of my ability to *hear this entire conversation.*”

“That’s surprising, I thought they fell off from your decades spent as a Capsicle-”

“*Guys,*” Rhodey interrupted loudly, holding up a silencing hand. “Can we, like, not be immature about this for maybe five minutes? Tony, stop being an asshole. Everyone else, stop interrupting the aforementioned asshole. Let’s just hear what he has to say and then we can all play Monopoly to let off some steam, or something.”

“An excellent idea,” Tony declared. “Unfortunately, due to that rude interruption, I’ve lost my train of thought.”

He hadn’t, of course. He was perfectly aware of the train of thought that was necessary for this conversation. Unfortunately, boarding such a train was proving to be a difficult obstacle to overcome.

Heart pounding, he shovelled down another dumpling to console himself.

You can do this. If you can’t do this, you don’t deserve to even adopt Peter.

Shuddering at both the uncharacteristic optimism of his invasive thoughts, and the uncanny

similarities it bore to what Pepper had told him earlier, Tony swallowed down his mouthful of dumpling and took a deep, steady breath.

To hell with boarding the train safely. Time to hijack the damn thing.

“Okay, so I was thinking,” he blurted, “about the issue we find ourselves in.”

“We find ourselves in many issues,” Vision pointed out. “A specification would be nice.”

“Well, it’s more of an issue that *one* of us finds himself in, but the rest of us have to deal with it and help him through it, so for all intents and purposes, it’s a collective issue,” Tony continued, his mouth dry despite the dumplings he had just inhaled. “If you haven’t picked up where I’m going with this, which I doubt some of the less youthful of this group have-”

“Friendly reminder, Tony,” Rhodey cut in. “Don’t be an asshole.”

“Right, force of habit,” Tony said, cursing his inability to maintain the basic elements of a polite conversation with others when under stress.

You’re totally not cut out for this.

Ah. There went his newfound optimism.

“Anyway, to cut a long rant short, I was thinking about the issue of Peter’s guardianship,” Tony said hurriedly, throwing caution to the wind. “You know how the press is on our backs about it. The hashtags, the posts. And not to mention, of course, the ever so slightly pressing problem of Child Protection Services.”

There were nods of agreement around the room, although no one uttered a verbal response, apparently too curious to hear what he had to say next. Feeling unusually edgy under the intense gazes of the team, Tony abruptly put his plate of food aside and stood up, beginning to pace in front of them.

“Well, there’s no easy way to say it, of course,” Tony went on, his heart now pounding somewhere in his throat. “It’s not the kind of news you can let out gently - but, I was just thinking, I guess, about how our original plan to just assume temporary legal guardianship of Peter is - flawed, to say the least. It won’t solve anything long term, it’ll look far too tokenistic and planned, as though we’re doing enough to appease the media but nothing more, it won’t be authentic, and worst of all, it might make Peter feel like nothing more than a burden, like a problem we’ve got to solve-”

Tony broke off, running an agitated hand through his hair as he tried to slow his breathing, which had become increasingly erratic as the steadiness of his rant had decreased. He couldn’t put it off any longer. It had to be said.

“-Which is why, due to all the rational and logical arguments I’ve just mentioned, I think the only reasonable solution to our problem, to *Peter’s* problem, is for me to....for me to adopt him.”

As soon as he said it, there was silence. So quiet that it was deafening. You could have heard a pin drop, and yet it felt like the very absence of noise was *roaring* in Tony’s ears.

Someone say something. Anything.

Then, just as he began to wish that the ground would swallow him up completely, Clint broke the explosive quiet.

“Well, about time,” he said casually. “I was beginning to think I’d have to do the damn thing myself if you didn’t hurry the fuck up.”

Tony stared at him incredulously, trying to find the catch, the hidden insult, in Clint’s words. Nothing. Nada. Not even a hint of mockery. Nothing but casual acceptance, sprinkled with a joking undertone, as though they were discussing a trivial matter like who was going to repaint the peeling wall on the fifth floor and *not* something as life-changing, as universe-altering, as *beautifully terrifying*, as the adoption of Peter-

“I’d second that,” Natasha chimed in. “Glad you’ve finally decided to spare us the suffering of watching you fail to commit to a decision.”

“Yes, the whole *will they, won’t they* thing was funny at first, but it got old really fast,” Steve agreed.

“It was like a really bad repeat of the juicy sexual tension between you and Pepper,” Rhodey smirked at him. “Minus the sexual part, of course.”

“We actually had a bet in place,” Sam added. “Ten bucks you’d adopt Peter, ten bucks you’d take off in a suit and work at Trader Joe’s indefinitely instead, driven away by your crippling fear of commitment. Which has been pathetic to witness, by the way.”

“*Tragically* pathetic,” Wanda agreed. “If I had to hear you telling Pepper what an incompetent father you would be one more time, I think I might’ve torn my eardrums out.”

“Pep, I just *can’t do it*,” Bruce mocked, adopting a high-pitched whine that was, in Tony’s opinion, entirely exaggerated. “What do you mean ‘I’m a superhero so fatherhood should be a piece of cake’, I can’t even tie my *shoelaces by myself*.”

“Valid point, of course,” Bucky added, grinning. “But painful to listen to.”

“I was five seconds away from forging your signature on the papers myself,” Rhodey chimed in.

“But it looks like you finally took matters into your own hands,” Clint grinned. “On behalf of all of us, *thank you*, Tony. It looks like we won’t have to gauge our own ears out with kebab skewers and engage in illegal acts of forgery after all.”

“You truly are a saint,” Natasha agreed. “Alleviating our suffering like that. How will we ever repay you?”

Tony stared at them all, at all of his friends and family, at their innocent expressions as they casually played along with the deception they’d created. He knew none of them had fully predicted the adoption - although maybe the overhead conversations with Pepper hadn’t been a total lie, since he *had* been talking pretty loudly, but he still doubted they’d fully put the pieces of the puzzle together - but rather than being mad about the lie, he was glad. Because they were all fully aware of the falsity of their statements - it was nothing more than a light-hearted joke, something they’d concocted on the spot to ease the tension of the situation. An ice breaker, designed to alleviate the room from some of its emotionally charged awkwardness.

But, beyond that, it was something else, too. Something much deeper. A message of acceptance.

They were okay with it. They didn’t think he’d grown two heads. They *supported* the idea.

In that moment, Tony appreciated them all more than he’d ever be able to say out loud.

“Well,” he said instead, grinning around at them all, heart feeling suddenly lighter, “for a start, I *could* use some pointers on how the hell to drop this bombshell on the kid.”

“Glad you asked,” Rhodey spoke up, grinning back at him in response. “Bruce, commence the PowerPoint. Tony, sit back and take notes, my friend.”

Bruce went to pull up a PowerPoint that didn’t exist, the rest of the team prepared to load Tony with all their combined knowledge and advice, and Tony returned to his plate of Chinese food, stuffing himself with another dumpling and marvelling at the sudden weight that had been lifted off his shoulders.

He felt good.

He felt really, really good.

This was probably the least questionable decision he’d ever made.

And by his standards, he thought, that was pretty damn impressive.

Chapter End Notes

So that was that.

Uh, leave comments cause we honestly love that stuff so much.

Anyway hope you enjoyed this marvellous concoction.

Byeeeeeeeee.

The Spider's Out Of The Bag

Chapter Notes

Hellloooo everybody, we're back with Chapter 20. I guess this is kind of a milestone for us, damn. We hope it lives up to expectations - and yes, the chapter title is again a pun, courtesy of my cowriter (PS_NoThanks). Would you really expect anything less of us?

On a slightly more depressing note, school's starting to get busy again and it's currently assessment season, so the next update might not be up for a few weeks. It's extremely sucky but not much can be done, unfortunately. Don't worry though, the next chapter will definitely be coming...it just might be slightly delayed.

We hope you're all staying safe and happy. This chapter's a bit of an emotional rollercoaster, so strap yourselves in and get ready. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After Peter dropped the bomb of a lifetime and then up-and-left, Ned was understandably a bit cranky. Cranky that Peter hadn't told him sooner, cranky that he'd left right after he dropped the biggest bombshell of a lifetime, and most importantly, cranky that he'd been *living with the actual freaking Avengers this entire time, and had still let Ned constantly ramble on about how awesome they were* .

Peter understood why Ned was a little mad, but he also didn't think he could be blamed. He was a veteran at keeping secrets, but he hadn't had a lot of practice with sharing them. He couldn't be expected to excel at *everything* on the first try, no matter how often he did it anyway.

Nevertheless, Ned's little grudge disappeared pretty quickly when Peter asked if he wanted to come over to the Tower. If he didn't know better, he'd think Ned was only friends with him for his fantastic connections.

Ned: Dude, are you sure this is OK?

Peter : Yeah, man, it's fine. I've given everyone a heads up. They know you're coming.

Ned: But... it's the Avengers, Peter. The. Fricken. Avengers. My childhood heroes. My teenagerhood heroes. Probably my adulthood heroes too, if we're gonna be real.

Peter: Probably won't be your heroes for long. Clint's gonna challenge you to a game of Mario Kart because I told him you'd be able to beat his ass, and once you see that man throw a tantrum because he didn't win, you'll lose all respect for him. The rest will follow.

Ned: You told Mr Hawkeye *what* !? I can't beat *Hawkeye* in Mario Kart! It's *Hawkeye* , Peter. He'll shoot me with his super awesome bow and arrow! Which, come to think about it, wouldn't be a bad way to go.

Peter: Nah, Tony banned him from using his bow anywhere except the gym after he attached an exploding arrow to a bucket of paint.

Ned: I'm shaking so hard right now. I'm about to meet the *Avengers* . This is huge, dude, why are

you so chill?

Peter: Uh, cause I live with them? I've seen them in their PJ's?

Ned: Oh my God, I forgot that you actually live with them for a second. This is insane.

Peter: Seriously, it's not that big of a deal. They're pretty cool, but also kind of annoying sometimes. I'm just worried about the Death Star. You've got it right? Didn't build any of it without me?

Ned: Who do you take me for, a criminal? Of course I've got it, and I'd never build it without you! Also can't believe you just called the actual, real live Avengers annoying.

Peter: Just being descriptive. Text me when you're here.

Ned: I'm here.

Peter: That was well-timed. Maybe we're telepathically linked?

Ned: Awesome... everything is awesome. This lobby is so awesome!

Ned: Hurry up and come get me, there's a big, buff security guy glaring at me and I'm pretty sure he's thinking about using me as a toothpick. Me, Peter. A toothpick. Who'd have thought?

Peter: Ah, don't worry about Frank. He's more for show than anything else. The real security is upstairs with me, lazing around the common room in their PJ's and bothering me about you while simultaneously insulting one other.

Ned: The Avengers are asking questions about little old *me* ?!

Peter : Yeah, they wanna know who's coming onto their turf. Also if you can be trusted, and how I met you. They're a little overprotective.

Ned: I think I may faint.

Peter: Don't do that, you'll drop the Death Star.

Peter: I'm coming.

Ned: Come save me from Frank, Mr Spider-Man.

Peter huffed a laugh as he tucked his phone into the back pocket of his jeans just as the doors of the elevator pinged open. He saw Ned standing off to the side to avoid the bustling business-people that worked in the lower levels of the Tower, his gaze shifting from Frank, to the lobby ceiling, and finally the elevator. His eyes lit up when he made eye contact with Peter and he started jogging over, the half-finished Death Star clutched tightly in his hands, the box with all the remaining pieces tucked under his arm.

"Dude, I'm not kidding, I think Frank wants to kill me," Ned whispered when he reached Peter, sending the man another nervous look.

Peter craned his neck to see the man better around an inconveniently placed pot plant. It was true, Frank looked severely intimidating. He had a hard jaw and was all raw muscle, barely concealed by a black t-shirt that was, frankly, at its breaking point, but Peter knew the truth. "Ned, seriously, Frank's a marshmallow. He bakes cookies in his spare time and volunteers at an animal shelter after work on Fridays. The man is an angel. A *baby* angel."

“Okay, okay... just, press the button. Close the door. I’m still getting heebie jeebie vibes from him.”

Peter chuckled at his friend, but pressed the button anyway. The elevator jolted and Ned seemed to realise that he’d been taken away from one ‘terror’ only to be dragged right towards another.

“I feel like I’m gonna hurl,” Ned muttered, and if Peter didn’t know his friend was just being dramatic, he’d genuinely think the other kid was going to be sick. Ned’s face was pale, his normally toffee-coloured skin a sickly white shade, and he was sweating like a pig in the process of being roasted alive.

“Don’t do it in the elevator. Pepper loves them.” He’d been trying to help by infusing the situation with a little humour, but Ned just blanched again.

“Pepper? As in, *the* Pepper Potts? CEO of Stark Industries? Holy shit, that woman is a legend. MJ will freak when I tell her!”

“*No*, Ned, you can’t tell anyone, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Damn, I guess she’ll just kill me when she uses her freaky sleuthing skills and inevitably finds out that I met Pepper Potts and *didn’t* tell her about the interaction.”

“You’re not even going to meet her, ‘cause she isn’t here, she’s in the office.”

“Oh thank God. I didn’t think I’d be able to handle that.”

“You’re really freaking out about this way too much. They’re seriously chill, dude,” Peter repeated as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. Ned just whimpered.

“Is that you, Pete?” Clint called from the couch, and Ned shrieked, trying to hide behind Peter. It didn’t work very well, partially because Ned was of a slightly larger girth than Peter, and partly because Clint wasn’t called Hawkeye for nothing. “Oh, is that your friend? Come say hi, everyone’s here.”

Peter rolled his eyes as Ned’s temperament seemed to flip like a switch. He went from a shy three-year-old to an excited three-year-old in five seconds flat, taking off down the hall as words rocketed from his mouth at record-breaking speeds. He also didn’t miss the fact that every single one of the Avengers were in the room. They were a nosy bunch, and had been desperate to meet Ned ever since they found out he was coming, partially because they hadn’t had anything new to poke around in for a while, and partially because they “wanted to make sure Peter was safe.” (As if Peter *wasn’t* a highly trained ex-HYDRA assassin who could beat the Black Widow in hand-to-hand combat sometimes, and was definitely able to take care of himself.)

By the time Peter made it to the end of the hallway, Ned had already introduced himself to half the Avengers, and Peter could see that everyone’s pre-conceived ideas that the boy may be a threat to Peter’s health and safety had flown out the window. Even Natasha was smiling slightly. There was just no way Ned could make anyone feel uncomfortable. It wasn’t something his DNA structure allowed.

Peter made eye contact with Tony, who was sitting next to Bruce and Steve on the side of the living room that Ned hadn’t introduced himself to yet. The man smiled and tilted his head at the over-excited boy, a glimmer of mirth in his eyes, but Peter also saw a hint of suspicion.

There was no way Tony was still worried about Ned being some sort of HYDRA agent, right? If even Nat thought Ned was harmless, Tony couldn’t possibly disagree. Or maybe Rhodey had been right all along, and Tony really was a paranoid old man?

Filing that little tidbit of information away for later, Peter approached an on-the-verge-of-hyperventilating Ned, and nudged him softly in the ribs. “Dude, calm down, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

Ned took a deep breath. “Right, yeah, calm. My specialty.” He readjusted his sweaty grip on the half-formed Death Star, and Peter eyed it warily. There was no way Ned would drop it. Not even the starstruck haze that he seemed to have descended into would make him do something like that.

Turns out, Peter was wrong, because Ned had just turned around to find Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, and Steve Rogers all sitting on the same couch and looking at him with varying amounts of amusement. The Lego set dropped, and Peter made a desperate dive for it, but he was too far away, and the whole thing shattered on the tiled floor. The chorus of *Whatcha Say* played in his mind as he collapsed onto his knees beside it, and he’d never hated Gen Z culture more.

Ned, being the traitorous, backstabbing, two-faced little bitch that he was, didn’t even notice the tragedy. He was too busy pointing a shaking finger at Bruce and trying to form words from the chaotic mess produced by his garbled brain. The poor man looked startled by the attention, and a little guilty. Why would he be guilty?

“Dude! It’s-” Ned began, before Bruce cut him off, which was oddly out of character for the normally-polite man.

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m the Hul-” Oh. Okay. Peter got it now. Bruce thought Ned was scared of him because *sometimes* he turned into a big green rage monster. Big deal. From Ned’s depictions of high school, he’d faced teachers scarier than the Hulk.

“The most renowned scientist of our generation!” Ned cried ecstatically, and Bruce’s mouth snapped shut. “We literally *just* learnt about your theory on how gamma radiation can be used to ionise atoms through the Compton effect! There’s a framed picture of you in hallway C!”

Bruce just looked shocked, and Peter felt pity tug at his heart. The man probably hadn’t gotten half of the recognition he deserved for his research, because for everything he did, the Other Guy came out and smashed some stuff up, overshadowing the image of a mild-mannered genius with a neanderthalic hulk.

“Hey, eh hem,” came the smug cough of Tony, “I think I should at least get to share the title of most renowned scientist of your generation. You know, cause I’ve revolutionised technology in all four corners of the globe.”

“Oh my God, it’s Tony Stark. Oh my God, Peter, look it’s Tony Stark. Peter. Peter look.”

“Yeah, Ned, I know,” Peter snapped, still grieving the loss of the Death Star. And no one had helped him pick up the thousands of pieces scattered everywhere. Wow, some world he lived in.

“Mr Stark, sir, your code is amazing,” Ned gushed, entering ultimate-fanboy mode as he gazed at Tony with worship in his eyes. “It’s literally one of the most complicated things I’ve ever seen. My robotics teacher showed us a little bit of the stuff you wrote back at MIT and... I just - it was a masterpiece. And you wrote it when you were fifteen, too. I’d barely be able to do half of that right now. Wow, I can’t believe this. Peter, Peter. Tony Stark’s sitting right here, what are you doing playing with Lego?”

Somewhere behind them, someone muttered, “Jesus Christ, it’s like Peter 2.0. This is actually kind of creepy.”

Peter ignored them, instead focusing on his insane friend. “I know, Ned. He’s my guardian,” he

grumbled, lying flat on his stomach to reach under the couch to find any stray pieces that may have slid under there.

“He’s your guardian? Tony Stark’s basically your fucking *dad*?” Ned screeched, not noticing the way both Peter and Tony flinched at the word ‘dad’. Huh, since when had the dad word become a touchy subject for him and Tony?

“Hey now, son, watch your language,” Steve said, coming in to save the day with his grandpa-like tendencies.

There was a scoff from somewhere in the corner of the room, where Peter had last seen Bucky, and a mutter of, “biggest fucking hypocrite to grace this Earth.”

Ned turned to Steve, and was it Peter’s imagination, or did Ned’s expression of undiluted joy darken slightly? “Sir, with all due respect, you’re going to have to shout me the ten dollars that I have to pay MJ now.”

Peter snorted, his attention finally drawn away from the ruins of the Death Star, because had Mr Ned ‘hero worship’ Leeds just talked back to Captain America?

Steve looked equally flabbergasted. “Ex-excuse me?”

“She bet me that you’d be exactly the same in real life as you were in the PSA’s, but I said ‘noooo, I bet he’s super-cool.’ I defended you, sir, and now I have to pay the price, so the least you could do is bear that cross with me.”

Tony choked on air at Steve’s mortified face. “Sorry, what PSA’s? FRIDAY, find as many of these as you can. I want one playing on the TV right now. Queue them all.”

Even Peter was drawn away from the decimated Lego set as a video loaded onto the screen, the thumbnail a picture of Steve, dressed in his old Captain America suit and grinning cheesily. He ignored Ned’s murmur of, “so cool,” as he jumped over the back of the couch to nestle himself between Bruce and Tony. Ned awkwardly perched himself beside Clint when the man gestured at the free space beside him, and then the video played.

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An hour later, all semblance of awkwardness and tension had left the room.

Mainly because no one had the energy to be awkward or tense when they were too busy laughing so hard they could feel themselves growing abs.

The PSA’s were the funniest thing Peter had seen in a long time, and it just made everything funnier when Ned said that all the teachers genuinely thought that they would make the kids behave, when it really just made them lose all respect for Captain America, which explained why Ned suddenly lost his inability to form properly-articulated sentences when he came face-to-face with Steve. The boy said that if there was ever an emergency at school and Captain America was the only superhero that showed up to save them, then no one would take him seriously. They’d spend their time quoting the PSA’s at him, and if that wasn’t a grim statement on just how little fucks today’s teenagers gave, Peter didn’t know what was.

Steve spent the entire time with his face buried in his hands, though everyone could see the tips of his ears growing steadily pinker as they watched more and more videos. Occasionally he muttered things like, “I was a broke twenty-something-year-old just outta the ice, give me a break!” which would only send everyone into another fit of laughter.

Eventually, they ran out of PSA's to watch, and YouTube automatically queued up another video for them. That was where the fun and games ended, for Peter at least, because it was a Spider-Man video ( *of course* , since when had his luck been anything but dismal?), titled '*Mystery Spider Dude's Best And Worst So Far*' .

He'd been trying to limit the Avengers' exposure to his alter-ego, risking his sanity and dignity in the process. The amount of times in the past two weeks that he'd lunged desperately towards the remote to change the channel whenever the tiniest flash of red or blue filled the screen was ridiculous.

But now, he couldn't do anything about it. Tony had already said something about being "interested in what this new guy could do," and the other Avengers had expressed their agreement. Peter didn't have a valid reason handy that would stop them, and it was really hard to think of one on the fly when Ned was sending him half-panicked, half-excited looks from where he was slouched on the couch.

So, he sank back into his seat and watched moodily as an excitable guy with great hair began the opening monologue. But before his secret alter-ego even made an appearance onscreen, Tony suddenly bolted up from his relaxed position on the couch, startling half the Avengers in the process.

"Oh, I forgot. Ted - Fred, whatever your name is, I need to have a little chat with you, alright?"

The other boy nodded nervously. "Uh, okay?"

Peter watched cautiously as Tony led his best friend out of the room. What was that man up to?

Whatever, he'd be able to grill Ned on it later, so he refocused back on the screen to find that the guy with the great hair was gone, and had been replaced by Peter. Well, he'd been replaced by Spider-Man, who was Peter, but no one knew that except Ned.

It was halfway through the video that Peter realised that all of the Avengers knew what his powers were.

He also knew that they weren't stupid (though a few of them could pass as intellectually challenged occasionally - *looking at you, Clint* ).

Which meant, they'd be able to put two and two together. There was no way someone could have the exact same powers as him and live in the same city. The chances were slimmer than Tony's patience in the morning before he'd downed a few cups of coffee.

Sure enough, by the end of the first video, he was receiving suspicious glances from the team on all sides, in varying stages of the process of *working it out*, and it was making his spider-sense go crazy.

A full on stare from Clint and Sam, a subtle side-eye from Natasha, a raised eyebrow from Bruce.

He could feel it as each person in the room figured it out and turned their gaze to him, and he couldn't help curling in on himself a little as more and more eyes fixed on him.

Finally, he couldn't take anymore, and bolted, grabbing the Death Star box as he went and steadfastly ignoring the cries of "Peter, wait!" from behind him. Maybe he'd just hide in his room for the next century.

Yeah, that seemed like a solid plan.

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“In here, Weasley,” Tony directed, pointing the kid in question towards the safety of his private room.

At this, the boy halted, turning and looking at Tony with a mixture of giddy awe and confused disbelief upon his features. “I - uh - sorry, what did you just call me?”

“Weasley,” Tony shrugged casually. “It’s called a reference, kiddo. I suggest you go and educate yourself and try again-”

“Hey, Mr Stark, sir - I mean, don’t mean to interrupt, of course,” Ned rushed to say, “but I know who the Weasleys are. Wizarding family from *Harry Potter*, red hair, freckles, severely in debt?” He flushed at this, as though it was somehow an illegal act to mention debt in front of Tony Stark.

Tony raised an eyebrow, sizing the kid up. “You know *Harry Potter* ?”

“Of course,” Ned said, and a tiny hint of sassy disdain leaked out from beneath the starstruck giddiness. “With all due respect, of course, Mr Stark, totally, but, like, it would be a total crime against humanity *not* to know *Harry Potter*.”

Not bad. Not bad at all. “Okay, you have gained a pint of respect,” Tony grudgingly admitted. “Mind you, there’s still a whole bucket to fill. Now in, Educated Fred, or do I have to shove you myself?”

Hurriedly, Ned rushed inside Tony’s room, almost tripping over his own two feet in his effort to get there. Tony followed him in, shutting the door behind them.

The kid stood in the centre of the room, his eyes as big as saucers and jaw wide and gaping as he turned in a circle, scanning the contents of the room. Tony watched his eyes travel over Pepper’s half of the room - neat and tidy and boring, as always - to his side of the bed, draped in various items of clothing and no less than five AC/DC shirts, and the floor beneath it, which contained several discarded magazines, a box of half-eaten pizza, and the helmet for Mark 64.

At this, the kid’s jaw dropped even further. A few inches more and it would be on the carpet itself.

“Oh my God,” he muttered, as if forgetting that Tony was there. “This is Tony Stark’s room. I’m in Tony Stark’s room. Iron Man just invited me into his room. Oh my god, this is the greatest-”

“*Ordered* you into his room,” Tony corrected irritably from behind the kid, folding his arms and fixing what he hoped was an authoritative glare onto the boy.

Apparently only just remembering Tony’s presence, the kid jumped nearly a foot into the air and turned, gobsmacked, to meet Tony’s gaze. His jaw opened and closed uselessly a few times, reminding Tony strongly of a stranded puffer fish gasping for air.

“Yeah, that’s right, Freddie-Bear,” Tony smirked. “I’m still here.”

The boy continued his gaping for several seconds longer, before apparently remembering that this was an invitation to speak. “Right. Yeah. Totally, sorry, forgot Mr Stark. Oh, and by the way, it’s Ned, not Fred. Ned Leeds.” He abruptly shut his jaw, his cheeks flaming as though correcting

Tony Stark was the equivalent to committing a cardinal sin.

Tony let the kid quiver in his boots for a bit, mostly because he was enjoying the sight of the boy close-mouthed for once. He was getting awfully bored of staring into Fred's - Ned's, now, apparently - tonsils.

"Well, damn, kid," he finally said. "Way to ruin a guy's *Harry Potter* reference. Although, I gotta admit, the whole Weasley-look alike joke was a bit far-fetched. Your hair's about as close to being red as mine is to being de-magnetised from its status of Total Lady Magnet."

Ned stared at him a moment longer, his eyes now so huge they were basically popping out of his head. "Tony Stark just made a joke to me," he muttered to himself, grabbing fistfuls of his hair and pulling them excitedly. "I just witnessed one of the great infamous Tony Stark one-liners. The greatest day of my life just got greater."

He dropped his hands, now looking on the verge of a full-blown hyperventilation attack. Tony seriously considered reaching out a hand to steady the guy, but thought better of it. At this rate, Ned would probably take a hand to the shoulder as a personal invitation to move into the Tower.

"Yeah, listen kid, I'm sure I'm very comedically gifted and all that," Tony said instead, trying not to let the impatience leach into his voice, "but can we try and focus here? Running on a bit of a tight time schedule."

"Right, yeah, focus," Ned said suddenly, straightening himself and attempting to look serious. "Of course, yep, that I can *definitely* do."

Tony took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, trying to logically order the confused mess of thoughts and feelings in his head. Unsurprisingly, he failed, and instead decided to just embrace the word vomit. Yes, there was a high probability that he'd end up seriously insulting this Leeds kid, but he didn't have the time or patience to refine what he needed to say into a friendly, Pepper Potts-worthy speech.

"Alright, here's the deal," he began. "Look, I don't know a lot about you." It probably was not the best time to mention the only-slightly-questionable hours of Google stalking. "I mean, my sources have told me that you're a harmless marshmallow - and looking at you now, I find it difficult to disagree - but appearances can be deceiving. Take the highly renowned and widely-feared Hawkeye for example. If I told you that under this very roof, he was currently housing a ten-foot tall stuffed elephant in his bedroom called Barnaby, those little saucer eyes of yours would pop like popcorn kernels, right?"

Oh, Tony *wished* he had a camera. He couldn't have called it better, and the look on Ned's face was priceless.

"Wait, seriously?" he blurted incredulously. "Are you seriously saying that Clint Barton, *the* Hawkeye, only the best archer in the world, has a stuffed elephant? No way, oh my God, there is absolutely *no* way-"

"Trust me, Pop-Eyes, there is," Tony reassured him, with a dismissive wave. "I gave it to him as a present. And he's disrespected it on *multiple* occasions, but that's a story for another day. The point is-"

"You *gave* him a freaking stuffed elephant?" Ned repeated. "Oh my God, I'm being let in on Tony Stark's secrets. This is *awesome*."

Tony let out a huff that was only half-exasperated. Tony was the first to admit that he'd never exactly object to a nice round of being powdered with attention - in fact, some would argue (cough, cough, Pepper) that he actively sought it out on a daily basis - but there was only so much Starstruck Fanboy a guy could take, especially when running on a time limit. And *this* particular fanboy had apparently decided that blind adoration was his new best friend.

"So awesome, definitely," he agreed dryly. "Let's get back on track, Dory, okay?"

This backfired incredibly well. Ned's jaw resumed its former gape and he gazed at Tony in awe. "Did you just - did you just call me *Dory*?"

"Yeah, I did, kid," Tony said impatiently. "You've got her hyperactivity thing *downpat* and your eyes are possibly even bigger than hers. And we all know about Dory's trademark fishbowl eyes."

Ned let out an excited moan. "Oh my God, Tony Stark just gave me a nickname *and* made a Disney reference at the same time. This is insane. This is crazy. I don't know whether I wanna scream or cry right now."

Jesus Christ. The kid looked about five seconds away from throwing himself at Tony's feet and reciting a bunch of *Hail Stark*'s. Pressing an exasperated fist to his forehead, Tony took a deep consoling breath before attempting to regain control of the conversation.

"How about neither?" he suggested. "Listen, kid, hate to be the killer of slightly-chaotic buzzes, but I've got some stuff I need to say and you're making it *very* difficult for a guy to vocalise. Although admittedly, that may partially be on me. The Disney reference was a bad idea." He took a moment to survey Ned, who had apparently finally decided to stop showing off his tonsils again. Taking this as a good sign, Tony continued onwards uncertainly. "Look, let's start by sitting down. You might wanna use Pepper's side though, I found mould growing on my pillow the other week."

"That is *awesome*," Ned declared, and Tony braced himself for another round of painful fanboying, but apparently the kid had finally gotten the message. Still in awe, he turned and dutifully sat on Pepper's side of the bed, facing Tony, who collapsed into the chair opposite.

"Okay, here's the thing," Tony began, realising there was no way to ease into this gently, as such. "I don't know how much Peter has told you about his past, but there are some things you need to know."

At this, Ned gulped and looked at the floor. Tony frowned at the reaction, which was a blinding contrast to the kid's overly-ecstatic behaviour only moments prior. Did this mean that Peter... *had* told Leeds about HYDRA? Or was this uncharacteristically sombre reaction the result of something else entirely?

His question was half-answered, at least, by Ned's nervous reply. "Um, no, sir. Peter hasn't really told me anything about himself. Not at all. We've only known each other for, like, three weeks or something, so he hasn't said much about his life. Except you guys, of course. He told me you're, like, his foster family, which can I just say, I think is *so awesome*."

Tony held up a hand. "Permission to speak denied." He watched as Ned abruptly fell silent, allowing himself a moment's pause for two reasons. Firstly, because Ned's mention of the whole *foster family* concept triggered an entirely primitive reaction within him, and he was now thinking about the adoption, and the ever-looming interview, and having to *tell Peter*-

Tony quickly told himself to calm the fuck down. He could not afford to have a breakdown, not here, not now. And *especially* not in front of this babbling, bumbling baboon.

The moment of pause continued to stretch on, though, because Tony's second reason for hesitation was much more pressing. His bullshit detector was practically flying through the roof. This kid was more transparent than Tony's Stealth Suit, and he would have bet a million bucks that Ned Leeds was lying.

"You sure you're not bullshitting me, kid?" Tony pressed, raising a suspicious eyebrow. "Peter definitely didn't tell you anything? 'Cause something smells real fishy here to me, although that may be due to the can of opened sardines that's sitting in my sock drawer."

"He told me another joke," Ned whispered excitedly, again to himself. "That's two on the Tony Stark joke counter."

"Wasn't a joke, kid, it was a fact. Now spill. What do you know?"

"N-nothing," Ned said quickly. Too quickly. Far too suspiciously quickly. "I know he's Peter, he lives with you guys, you're like his family. He never outright said it, but I'm assuming he doesn't have parents. Like, a mum or dad or anything. Does he?"

Damn it. Whether he was aware of it or not, this transparent kid really knew how to exploit Tony's weaknesses. The mention of Peter's parents (or lack thereof), and specifically, the word *dad*, had him on the verge of another panic attack. *Adoption, Peter, interview, adoption, Peter. Holy fuck. I have to tell the kid.*

"Not now," Tony muttered, and then realised he'd spoken aloud. Jesus Christ. He was losing his cool in front of the Ultimate Cool-Loser himself. Tony didn't think this kid had any cool left to *lose* at all, and here he was, acting like a complete idiot in front of him.

Get it together. How the hell are you gonna be a father for Peter if you lose a battle of dignity to a Star Wars nerd at the mention of the word 'dad'?

"Not now?" Ned repeated aloud. "Like, he used to before? They died, is that it?"

"Never mind that now," Tony announced, ignoring Ned's perplexed look and deciding to tackle the issue of the kid's blatantly-obvious deception another time. Preferably, after he had gotten the Adoption-hurdle out of the way. "Point is, his parents aren't around. Now I don't know what it is you're not telling me, buddy, but frankly I don't have time to Sherlock it out of you. I'm just gonna cut to the chase here, all right?"

"Okay, yep, I'm listening," Ned said hurriedly, watching Tony with utmost attention.

"Look, your pal Peter - he didn't exactly have the friendliest of upbringings," Tony went on. "In fact, I'm gonna be straight with you - he had a shit upbringing. The shittiest of the shit, some would argue. Take all the broken marriages and dysfunctional families in the world, combine them together, and you still probably wouldn't reach the level of pure shit that Peter went through as a kid."

He'd captured the Leeds kid's attention, now, he could see it. The boy's clumsy worshipping act had drained away entirely, the awestruck look in his eyes entirely replaced by fear and confusion at what Tony was saying.

"What, like he was abused?" Ned repeated, his voice unsteady. "Neglected? Did he live with some foster family before you guys that starved him? Beat him and stuff?"

"Not exactly," Tony replied grimly. "I wish it was that simple."

“What, then?” Ned asked, all bumbling attempts at worship and respect-in-overdrive out the window. He was watching Tony with wide eyes, leaning forward in his spot on the bed, fixated on his every word.

Tony let out a long breath. “Kid, you ever heard of HYDRA?”

Ned looked slightly affronted at the change of topic, but he seemed to regain some of his former enthusiasm as he replied. “Yeah, of course! The evil dudes from World War II, the ones that the not-so-cool Captain America saved the world from way back, and then, like, a year ago with that whole SHIELD thing, when they almost destroyed the world with Project Insight-”

“Damn, you really need to get yourself a life, my guy,” Tony told Ned factually. “You’ve clearly spent way too much of your spare time researching the Avengers and their origin stories into oblivion. If you know that much about my good pal Steve, I’m gonna hope you know *just* as much, potentially even more, about me?”

“Oh, yeah, of course, sir,” Ned rambled enthusiastically. “You got captured by the Ten Rings in Afghanistan and built the first suit to fight your way out-”

“Thanks for the refresher, kid, but I was just checking I didn’t need to kick you out, or something,” Tony interrupted, raising a hand. “Look, back to the matter at hand. The reason I brought up HYDRA isn’t for a history lesson - it’s to tell you that - well - you know Barnes? Bucky Barnes?”

“The Winter Soldier,” Ned confirmed, a note of awe in his voice. “He is *awesome* .”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Tony corrected, “but even to those who maintain that he is, in fact, awesome, I can assure you, his history was *not* .”

“Yeah, he was brainwashed and tortured into, like, a deadly HYDRA assassin,” Ned interjected, a note of reverence in his voice. “I know.”

“Oh, good, that saves me the pain of explaining the details to you,” Tony muttered. Then, clearing his throat and psyching himself up for the bombshell, he met the kid’s gaze. “So take what happened to Bucky and apply it to Peter. That’s his upbringing in a nutshell.”

For a moment, there was silence. The eye-popping had returned with more force than ever before as Ned stared at Tony, putting the pieces together in his head, clearly hardly daring to believe it.

“Wait, oh my God, no, you have to be joking,” he said incredulously. “Mr Stark, do you mean, are you trying to tell me that-” he dropped his voice to a horrified whisper - “that *Peter* was, like, a Winter Soldier?”

Tony nodded, holding eye contact with Ned’s shocked gaze. “In essence, yes. He had a different name and was used for slightly different purposes, but the basics remain the same. Tortured, brainwashed into an unfeeling murder machine, and forced to work with HYDRA against his free will.”

“Oh my God,” Ned whispered, his face paling considerably. “Oh my God. Oh my God, I think I’m actually gonna hurl this time.”

“Please don’t,” Tony interjected. “Pepper will kill me.”

Ned was apparently too shocked to take heed of this. “Oh my God, he was with *HYDRA* ,” he said, looking terrified. “The poor dude. And he always acted so normal, so chill, so *fun* - why didn’t he tell me his life was a shit show?”

Scrap it, Tony thought. His earlier assumption had clearly been wrong. He didn't take Ned Leeds for much of an actor, but even if he had been, he doubted the kid would be able to replicate such an authentically horrified reaction to news he'd already heard. Maybe the kid's earlier dodgy statements had been nothing but remnants of his highly-charged nerves.

"Probably for this exact reason," Tony suggested calmly. "Look, kid, I know this sounds a little crazy, but you've got to understand that it was a *dark* time for Peter. Like, really dark. He doesn't remember a time before HYDRA, and trust me, when we first found him, he was *really* fucked up. In all kinds of ways. He doesn't like talking about it, or making a big deal about it, or just acknowledging that it happened at all, really. He's recovered pretty well, but you're a smart kid, you can work out why he wouldn't want something like that tossed around in casual conversation."

Ned stared at Tony in paralysed horror for a moment, before swallowing, still looking quite nauseous. "Yeah - I - of course," he stammered, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I get it. It's just - I knew he had no parents, but I never expected - expected something like *this*..." He trailed off, swallowing down what looked to be the urge to vomit, and cast his eyes helplessly around Tony's room. Apparently finding nothing that could console his obvious shock, he re-fixated his gaze on Tony. "But - how did he escape? Out of HYDRA, I mean?"

"Long story," Tony replied, with a wave of his hand. "Basically, he was on a mission and heard something - a song, sung by this random dude - that triggered a memory in him, one that wasn't from HYDRA. It made him remember things from before, so he ditched his mission and ran. He was homeless for about six months until we found him. Well, actually more like he found *us* - I found myself in a sticky situation back then, surrounded by a large group of unfriendly gentlemen without my suit on me, and Peter stopped them from turning me into a pancake. They were HYDRA agents, actually. He took them all out easy-peasy."

"Oh my God," Ned repeated, falling back on the one phrase he seemed capable of in times of incredulity. "That is so cool. Like, epic levels of cool."

"It was ever so slightly impressive," Tony admitted, only slightly grudgingly. "But listen, kid, I'm not done. First off, this HYDRA thing has to be kept under wraps. It's one of, like, four total things the media *doesn't* know about in the life and times of the Avengers right now, and we'd like to keep it that way. You can obviously imagine it'd raise some dodgy questions."

Ned nodded quickly. "Yeah, of course, Mr Stark. I totally get that."

"And that may include Peter himself," Tony went on. "I don't know if I have faith in this at all to begin with, since you obviously have a clear case of blabbermouth-when-excited, and you and Peter squeal like a couple of teenage girls when in each other's presence. But I'm gonna trust that, given the ever slightly so depressing nature of this information, you won't have *too* much trouble not bringing it up in conversations with Peter. Trust me, it'll make things very awkward very fast."

"Right, okay," Ned nodded. "Don't tell Peter. Shouldn't be too hard."

Tony doubted this, but decided to take the rarely-used path of blind optimism and continue his lecture. "I guess you're wondering, then, why I'm telling you this at all," he continued, gazing intently at Ned.

The kid hesitated only slightly. "Just a little bit, yeah."

Tony nodded, unsurprised. "Well, here's the thing, kid." Abruptly, he rose out of his seat and began to pace in front of Ned, formulating the words in his mind. "I've kind of given up on my conspiracy theory that you're, like, a secret HYDRA agent out to drag Peter back to base and blend

his brain into mush again. No offence, but you have the subtlety of a pet lion.” He paused to survey Ned thoroughly, and was pleased to see that the kid had the good sense to stay quiet.

“But just because I’ve decided to put my trust in you on *that* matter, doesn’t mean it’s all sunshine and daisies,” Tony went on, speaking slowly to allow the weight of his words to sink in. “You may not be out to actively hurt Peter, but that doesn’t mean you can’t hurt him indirectly. Not intentionally, maybe, but hurt him all the same. So we need to establish some ground rules if this bromance you’ve got with the kid is gonna become a long-term thing.”

Ned gulped, looking apprehensive, but nodded all the same. “Uh, yes, sir.”

“Rule number one,” Tony announced, fixing the kid with a solemn stare. “You can’t take Peter *anywhere* without telling me first and letting me know where you guys are. Call me a dictator all you want, but the last time I left the kid in the company of someone else, he got re-captured by HYDRA, so I’ll be damned if I’m going to repeat that mistake again.”

At this, Ned’s eyes widened to their former-saucer state, and the nauseous look returned. “Wait, he got *recaptured* by -”

“I’m not done, Edward Cullen,” Tony interrupted loudly, holding up a silencing finger. “Seriously, if your face goes any paler, you’ll become translucent. Now, on more pressing matters, the second condition of your friendship with Peter is that you don’t take him to any overly public places, on the basis that you’ve already told me you’re hanging out in the first place. HYDRA’s still looking for the kid, you understand? The minute they find him, they’ll drag his ass back to New Mexico and start torturing him before you can say *Yoda*. Until we figure out some kind of fake identity for Peter to hide behind, you guys will mostly just have to hang here, at the Tower, or at your house, unless accompanied by the member of a team. And I’m guessing you don’t want a babysitter.”

At this, Ned looked positively ill. “Wait - sir - so you’re saying Peter *shouldn’t* go outside alone? Like, in public? Without one of you guys around?”

“Yeah, that’s the deal, my guy,” Tony replied firmly. “Why, is there a problem?”

“No, no, nothing,” Ned answered hurriedly. “It’s just, uh, annoying is all.”

Tony eyed the kid for several moments, noting that the colour in his face had still not returned. Alarm bells were ringing in his ears, the same alarm bells that had told him the kid was lying earlier, but again due to time constraints, he was forced to ignore them. If he didn’t end his lecture soon, the Avengers would drag him and Ned back to the communal area by force.

I’ll grill the kid on these dodgy reactions later.

“Okay, and final rule,” he went on forcefully. “Apart from your family, who I assume already know about him from your little play date, try and keep the whole *Peter’s-my-new-boo* talk to a minimum. There are photos circulating out on the glorious world of social media taken by paps a few months back, around Christmas, and those photos include both mine and Peter’s faces. If you haven’t been living under a rock for the last month or so, you’ll know that the media is *fully* aware we are keeping a kid here, supposedly against his will, at the tower, and it’s not the most un-suspicious of circumstances. If you start introducing Peter to all your little friends - which may be entirely non-existent, based on what I’ve gathered about your lack of a social life - but either way, if your potentially-existent friends put two and two together and realise he’s the kid that, rumour has it, is being held hostage by the Avengers, well, again, use that brain of yours. You realise the problems it would create, right?”

Ned thought for a moment, and then nodded determinedly. “Yeah, I think I got it. Okay. Shouldn’t be too hard. My mum already knows, but you said that’s fine, and my lips are now sealed.”

“Good. Keep them that way,” Tony said, piercing Ned with a final glare. “I mean it, buddy. If you break any of these rules, the consequences could be disastrous, and not just because it’ll mean you’ll have to kiss goodbye to your *Star Wars* buddy for good. Peter could get taken by CPS. He could get captured by HYDRA. He could be *killed*. You got that, Leeds? You’re clear on what I’m saying here?”

Ned gulped uneasily. “Crystal, sir.”

Tony continued to glare at him for a slightly-exaggerated moment, before deciding he’d given the kid sufficient cause to be scared into compliance. No need to overdo it on the threats. “Good. Glad we sorted that out. Now, kid, you got any questions before we return to the communal area, to indulge in the joys of Rogers’ dark days as a PSA feature?”

He’d asked the question purely out of courtesy, which was a rare thing for him to begin with, but now Tony wondered why he even bothered. Apparently, the kid *did* have a question, which Tony hadn’t counted on at all, and he was now faced with the unfortunate prospect of having to answer it.

That is, if the kid overcame his sudden crippling speech impairment. Words seemed to be entirely failing him. He bit his lip anxiously, opening his mouth several times only to remain silent. The image of the gaping fish returned, and Tony amused himself with this metaphorical connection for several minutes before losing patience.

“Okay, kid, spit it out,” he said. “I thought you were supposed to be bright.”

Ned flushed nervously, and glanced up at Tony. “Uh, sorry, I’m just - it’s just - well, I was wondering.” He spoke clumsily and treacherously, the words almost tripping over each other as they exited his mouth in a chaotic lump. “I know you said Peter can’t really go out in public, until he, like, gets a fake identity and stuff, but once that’s happened, and you’ve sorted everything out with the media and things, well, it’s just I couldn’t help but notice, sir, that Peter, like, doesn’t have a life. I mean, no, of course he does, he lives it up with you guys and I’m so totally jealous of him and I’d trade places any day. But what I mean is, he doesn’t go to school. Apart from me, he doesn’t really have friends. And what I’m thinking is, and Peter’s told me before he kinda wants to go, too, is that after you sort out his identity and everything, maybe he could, like, I dunno, come to my school? Midtown?”

Oh. That certainly hadn’t been what he’d expected. Tony considered this for a few moments, recalling how Peter had previously expressed interest in going to school as well. It had been on the cards for a while, but he’d never gotten around to thinking about it, what with his ever-growing list of much more pressing problems.

“It’s not such a bad idea,” he told Ned honestly. “The kid has said he wants to go to school, and I know Midtown’s got a pretty good reputation.”

“Oh, it does,” Ned told him earnestly, and Tony could see the excited rant forming within him even before the words started tumbling out. “It’s a STEM school for like, gifted and talented kids - not to brag or anything, by the way - but yeah, Peter would fit *right* in. He could join the decathlon team with me, and he’d do super well, I can tell he’s like, a genius, and it would give him something to do, you know, like mental stimulation, especially ‘cause everyone who goes is like, at least semi-smart, so it wouldn’t be drag, and I know he’s already busy, with you guys and the Avengers and being Spider-Man and just in general, you know, *superhero things*-”

Abruptly, Ned went silent. His once-pale face rapidly deteriorated to the colour of grey elephant skin.

Tony, on the other hand, felt paralysed. His heart appeared to have fallen somewhere to his feet.

“Being *what?*” he hissed, his tone dangerous.

“Oh, shit,” Ned muttered. “Oh, my god, I shouldn’t have said that, I should not have said that, Peter’s gonna kill me...”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Tony interrupted, snapping his fingers in front of Ned’s face. His heart was beating very fast. He could feel blood pounding in his ears. “Listen up, buddy. I don’t care what you should or shouldn’t have said. What matters is what you *did* say, and I distinctly heard the words *Spider-Man* come from your mouth, in reference to Peter. Am I wrong, Leeds?”

Hurriedly, Ned shook his head, looking panicked.

“Didn’t think so,” Tony said, his voice low and angry. “Now. Tell me what you meant by that. Right now.”

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It didn’t take long for Ned to explain everything. The kid had a flimsy resolve at the best of times, and when faced with the prospect of being threatened by one of his favourite Avengers, it had crumbled into dust completely.

Ned talked. Tony listened. By the time the kid finished, Tony was seeing red.

“Stay here,” he warned the boy, before exiting the room and marching into the communal area.

He entered to find the Avengers lounging in their usual spots, talking in low voices and entirely devoid of Peter.

“Where the hell is he?” Tony demanded, speaking to the team from the doorway.

Steve glanced up, frowning. “Who? What’s the problem, Tony?”

“Never mind his problem,” Clint interrupted. “Tony, whatever your issue is, we’ve got a bigger one. We were watching YouTube videos about this Spider-Man guy, and it took all of five seconds for us to realise-”

“I know it’s Peter,” Tony interrupted. “I need to talk to him. Right now.”

“He’s in his room,” Natasha offered in her usual level tone.

“Excellent,” Tony said, and he turned and marched back into the elevator, punching in the button for the bedroom floor.

His heart pounded furiously against his chest as the elevator dropped, and Tony realised, then, exactly what it was. This feeling. It was anger. Not just a hint of playful frustration, or even moderate irritation, but real anger. Hot and dangerous. If he wasn’t careful, he’d probably start yelling at the kid. Excessive yelling was something Tony never intended to do when it came to almost-adopted children. It reminded him far too strongly of Howard.

*Calm down. Don’t go nuts. Just have a level conversation with him.*

He reached the kid's door and, for the first time ever, didn't bother knocking. Opening it, he found Peter lying on the edge of his bed, staring sullenly up at the ceiling and agitatedly twisting a T-shirt in his hands.

"Kid," Tony announced, "we need to talk."

Peter sat up, watching Tony with weary, guarded eyes. Tony swallowed down the white-hot fury within him, trying to keep the monster at bay, and turned and shut the door behind him with a little more force than necessary.

In his effort to contain his anger, the anger that was scaring even him, Peter must have noticed something was off and filled in the details. He stared up at Tony, dark apprehension in his eyes.

"You know, don't you," he said miserably to the wall in front of him.

For a moment, Tony hesitated, struggling with the burning anger and the pounding in his ears and the struggle of his heart.

*Keep it together.*

"If you mean about your spidery little secret," he said, working to keep his voice steady, "then yes. I'm pretty sure the whole team knows, Pete."

Peter groaned and buried his face in his hands. He remained like that for several minutes. When he finally looked up and met Tony's gaze, there was something desperate in his eyes. Almost like a cry for help.

"I'm sorry," he said, averting his gaze from Tony's again. Speaking to the wall, he continued: "I'm sorry, I'm really, really sorry."

"I know you are," Tony replied, as calmly as he could. He was still battling the rage monster, fighting to keep it from exploding outwards entirely. "But Pete, I feel I have to ask the dreaded question: what the fuck were you thinking?"

Peter dragged his eyes over to Tony once more. He said nothing, watching him miserably. Waiting for the outburst, it seemed.

When he next spoke, Tony struggled to contain his yell.

"You do realise, right, that we haven't dealt with HYDRA yet," he said to the kid, blood pounding in his ears. "They're still *out there*, Peter, and their number one goal is you. They'll do *anything* to get you back. They already tried to, once before. You know what happened. You know what they're capable of."

Tony ground his teeth. The anger was causing him physical pain, so great was its need to be entirely unleashed, and it was only the primitive, all-consuming fear of becoming the spitting image of his unholy father that prevented him from descending into the depths of his rage completely. Beneath that, though, was something else, too - a hatred, a complete and utter revulsion, for himself. Hatred that he had to say these things, had to be cold and furious with Peter, had to remind him of past events and re-open barely healed wounds-

*But you don't have to do anything. This is all your choice, Stark. You're choosing this path.*

Tony shoved the guilt away. It killed him, but he had to ignore it. He had to make Peter understand. Had to make him realise the gravity of the situation, had to make him see that his life was at stake,

that *Tony couldn't live without him-*

“You could have died.” The words erupted out of him, painful and layered with poison, but he could contain them no longer. “Do you understand what I’m saying, Peter? You’re all over the internet now. Your abilities are out there for everyone to see. Did it never occur to you that HYDRA might put their excellent databases to good use and happen across one of these videos? That they might put two and two together, recognise your abilities and, by extension, your identity? They’d take you within a matter of hours, and I - *I might not be able to save you a second time*. They’ll tighten their security, make sure *no one* can get in. They could brainwash you again. They could torture you again. *Peter, you could be killed.*”

He was yelling now. When the shaky, pained, constrained words had morphed into a furious yelling tirade, Tony didn’t know. Nor could he prevent it. It was all pouring out of him, the anger and the guilt and the fear, and the louder his voice got, the harder it was to control.

“But I guess you don’t care about that, do you? I suppose it’s all worth it, as long as you can dress up in a onesie and give an old lady her handbag back. Peter, it’s an honourable intention, but do you know how much you’re risking for that one handbag? *Your entire life*. Your entire fucking life, Pete, and you’re willing to throw it away just like that? Does it really mean that little to you? Do you *want* to be killed?”

The harsh words echoed around the empty room, reverberating off the walls and slicing open the cold air like a knife. The remnants of Tony’s yells seemed to haunt the silence long after they had dissipated entirely, and Peter was still just sitting there, staring down at his lap, and in that moment, Tony had never hated himself more.

And as he was drowning in a pool of revulsion, the kid spoke.

“I don’t want to be killed,” he said, very quietly, barely above a whisper.

Tony just stared at him, heart still hammering, blood still pounding. He felt dirty, impure, toxic. Like he’d been poisoned. The remnants of his yells still hung in the air, haunting the space between him and Peter.

“I don’t want to be killed,” Peter repeated, and this time it was stronger, more definite, and he looked up and made eye contact with Tony. “I mean it. I - I know how it must look, finding out about this, the stuff I’ve been doing, but I swear, that’s not why - that’s not the reason.”

*Do you want to be killed?*

Tony looked at Peter and didn’t say anything. He was empty of words, and full of poison.

“It’s because,” Peter continued, his voice shaking ever so slightly, “it made me feel good.”

Silence. A few beats passed, in which the kid fidgeted with the T-shirt in his hands, and Tony remained paralysed to the floor, staring at Peter.

“Not that you guys don’t,” Peter went on, a note of apology in his voice now. “You were the only people that made me feel happy, ever, for as long as I can remember. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this good. It’s been ages since I’ve felt *not good*. But feeling good now - it doesn’t change the things I’ve done. The not so good things.”

He paused, glancing quickly at Tony, almost as if he was checking if he was still alive. Tony didn’t blame him. He felt as though the last piece of his soul had died only seconds ago, when he’d yelled those unforgivable things at Peter. Either that, or his very own poison had killed him.



Peter took a shaky, unsteady breath before continuing. "I've killed people before, Tony. You don't know what that's like. I know you *think* you're responsible for the deaths of people in Sokovia, and New York, but you never had the intention of killing. You were always fighting for the good side. You've never held a gun to someone's head and shot them, at point-blank range. You've never held a knife to a person's throat and slit it. You've never seen the - the light in their eyes, watching it go out, knowing *you* caused that. Knowing you murdered someone.

"And-" He paused briefly as his voice cracked, looking down at his T-shirt and twisting it furiously as he took another deep breath. Peter looked back up and went on, "And as happy as I've felt since I came here, and as good as I've felt, it still never went away, you know? Just knowing what I'd done, knowing all the people I'd killed. I guess it felt wrong, to feel so happy and so good when I'd caused the exact opposite for so many innocent people in the past."

He broke off again, staring back down again at the material in his hands. Tony waited. Dimly, he noticed that the blood was no longer pounding. His heart had resumed at a less furious pace.

"So I did it," Peter muttered into his hands. "I first got the idea that day in Central Park, when I helped the lady get her handbag back. It just made me feel really good, you know? Giving someone something, rather than taking it. I know, I know, it's just a stupid handbag. But I guess it made me feel like - like I was making up for the things I'd done with HYDRA. Like I could, I dunno, somehow pay for my crimes by reversing them. Instead of murdering people, I could save them. So I bought the suit when I was shopping with Thor, and thought of the name, and then I started - sneaking out. And helping people. Swinging around and stopping people from getting mugged, attacked, that kind of thing. And I'm really, really sorry, 'cause I know it probably sounds totally stupid to you, and pointless. It *is* stupid. I get that. But I just-"

He broke off suddenly as his voice cracked again, blinking furiously. Tony saw the silent tears as they welled up in his eyes and streamed down his cheeks, and it was the sight of the tears that brought him to life.

He walked over to Peter, his legs feeling like wood, and stood in front of him. Hesitantly, he deliberated for a moment, before sitting down next to the kid.

"Peter," he said, the words clunky in his throat. "I don't think it's stupid at all."

Peter sniffled, and looked up at him, tears still streaming down his face. "It's okay, Tony. You don't have to lie just to make me feel better."

"It's not a lie," Tony insisted. "What you did was dangerous, and reckless, and scared the shit out of me when I heard about it, if I'm being perfectly honest. But I know why you did it. And I get it. And it doesn't sound stupid at all."

"You're right, though," Peter muttered miserably, looking away from Tony as the tears kept flowing. "I shouldn't have done it. I should have known it was too risky. I knew you'd all say no to it, that's why I didn't tell you, deep down I *knew* it was wrong, but I still went and fucking did it anyway-"

"Hey, hey, none of that," Tony interrupted gently, and he took Peter's chin in his hand and turned it towards him, forcing Peter to look him in the eyes. "Look, I know I just yelled my ass off at you a minute ago, but this really isn't your fault. You wanted to feel good after a life of being made to feel like shit. You wanted to redeem yourself after a lifetime of forced crime. And I know you've been stuck in this damned Tower for so long. It's only natural that you'd want to try something like this."

Peter stared at him with miserable eyes, and sniffled again. Tony hated seeing those eyes so sad. It reminded him of the time after Peter's return from HYDRA, when that look had frequented his features on a daily basis. Awkwardly, he reached out a hand and brushed some of Peter's tears away.

"You wanna know the real reason why I yelled at you?" Tony asked quietly. "Not because I was mad. Because I was scared."

"Scared?" Peter repeated dubiously, watching him forlornly.

"Scared *shitless*, Pete," Tony confirmed. "I heard what you'd been doing, and I freaked. I went into this weird state of panic, and it all just manifested into this unholy fit of rage, because apparently that's the only way I know how to express my emotions. The truth is, kiddo, I'm scared of - of losing you. Of you getting taken by HYDRA again, and tortured, and brainwashed, or worse, of you being straight-up killed. I'm scared of losing you, Peter. Maybe that's why I'm such an overbearing asshole sometimes."

"You're not," Peter said quietly. "I mean, okay, you are a major pain in the ass about the little things. But Tony, with the stuff that *really* matters, you're - you're amazing. My nightmares, my panic attacks, whenever I felt sad or annoyed or bored or *anything*, really - you were always just - there. Ready to help. And you never complained, even though I bet you got tired of it. Sometimes....sometimes I feel like I'm this constant problem, weighing you down. I think that's at least partially why I became Spider-Man. To solve problems for once, instead of creating them."

"It's a nice sentiment, Pete," Tony allowed, looking him seriously in the eye, "but please, for the love of God, never say you're a problem to me ever again. I mean it, okay? You are the least unproblematic thing that's happened in my life since....since Pepper, honestly. You're..." He trailed off, gazing down at his hands and swallowing, because he could feel the words building in his throat, feel them burning with the burden of the days and the weeks and the months that he'd refrained from saying them. He could feel a lifetime of mistakes, weighing him down, mingling with the poison, and he could feel the words. A small antidote. A small ray of hope against the mistakes.

So he said them.

"I love you, Peter. You're like a son to me." And then, looking the kid right in the eye, with his throat burning, he finished the sentence. "And, if you'll let me, if you want to, and *only* if you really agree to it....I want to adopt you."

Seven seconds passed. Tony could hear the ticking of the clock counting out each one, and they felt like the longest seconds of his life.

Finally, Peter's voice rang out.

"Screw your *if*'s. It's a yes, Tony. Of course it's a yes."

Tony looked at him, and for a long moment, the words did not comprehend. When they did, he found he couldn't speak. Surely it was too good to be true. Surely Peter didn't mean...

"You're sure?" he asked, hardly daring to believe, but wanting it so badly. He wanted to believe so badly it hurt.

Peter gazed right back, and a smile formed on his lips, and he laughed. He actually *laughed*.

"Yes, Tony. I'm sure. I don't even have to think. I've never been more sure about anything in my

life.”

For a moment, Tony could only stare into the chocolate-brown eyes. A second of incredulous silence. And then he laughed, too. The tension and the worry and unnecessary panic all ebbed away, and Tony felt lighter than air. Grinning madly, he put his arms around Peter and pulled him into a rare hug.

“Ugh, Tony, what is this?” Peter protested weakly, his face squashed against Tony’s shoulder. “Since when are you the hugging type?”

“Since the happiest moment of my life just occurred,” Tony replied, holding the kid tight. “Shut up, kid, I’m having a moment. And here you are. Ruining things as usual.”

After much protest and struggle from Peter, Tony finally gave into his whining and let go. Peter glared at him, but there was laughter in his eyes.

“This better not become a regular thing just because you’re adopting me,” he threatened.

“Oh, don’t worry, it won’t,” Tony reassured him. “I need approximately three minutes of physical affection every leap year to remain functional. Since you’ve just given me that, you can enjoy the next four years hug free.” Standing up from the bed, he reached out a hand and ruffled Peter’s hair, still relishing in pure elation of the adoption burden finally being lifted. The burden that had been weighing him down for weeks now, a constant voice in his ear, whispering doubts and worries. All gone. He was finally free.

There was only one matter left to settle.

“All right, now that I’ve regained my dignity, let’s sit down and have a civil discussion about how this Spider-Man thing’s gonna work.”

## Chapter End Notes

Whew. If you even made it this far, congrats, you're still here. Thanks so much for reading that slightly chaotic chapter. Kudos and comments are always welcomed :)

# The Death Of Asset

## Chapter Notes

Hello, friends! We're back, wielding a chapter that we are really proud of.

This one's pretty intense, a lot of angst, but also a lot of fluff. Would it really be a chapter from us if it didn't have healthy mix of both?

The next chap will take a while to come out, because we're heading into assessment season, but it will show up eventually.

Hope everyone's staying safe, and that you enjoy this update :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Well, I’m glad that finally happened.”

Tony sighed into the cushion currently covering his face. He was sprawled across the lounge in one of the Avengers’ many living rooms, face down on the material as Pepper paced above him.

“How did I know you would say that?” he muttered.

“Well, what else do you suggest?” she demanded exasperatedly. ““Good job, wow, it took absolutely no prompting at all”? I have slightly more class than *that* - as if I would stoop to such levels of grovelling. Especially when it’s a total lie.”

“Yeah, well, at least I didn’t get you to deliver the blow for me,” Tony pointed out. “You should consider that a serious win. I was genuinely thinking about asking you to do it, but something held me back.”

“Maybe your in-built fear of being rejected by a woman?”

Tony scoffed. “See, now you’re just being ridiculous. As if I’ve ever let women reject me in the past - I always beat them to it.”

“Sure you did, Tony,” Pepper said sceptically. “Because you’re so great at predicting and accurately gauging the emotions of others.”

“What has this turned into, Pick On Tony Stark day?” Tony complained. “I’ve just told you that Peter knows about the adoption - the least you can do is give me some *credit*.”

“I’d like to know a bit more about the circumstances, first,” Pepper replied. “For all I know, you could have been forced into it. A threat from Clint would potentially do it, a challenge of your masculinity from Steve would *definitely* do it-”

Tony abruptly sat up, piercing Pepper with one of his most heartfelt glares. “I’ll have you know it was none of the above. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Potts - it was actually *entirely my decision*. Although I suppose some credit to that Leeds kid is due.”

“Leeds?” Pepper repeated, raising an eyebrow. “You mean Ned Leeds? Peter’s new friend?”

“The one and the same,” Tony confirmed. “When he came over yesterday, I pulled him aside to, uh...set some matters straight. Things about Peter’s past, his time with HYDRA, the boundaries

and limitations of being an active fugitive of HYDRA. That kind of small talk.”

Pepper shot him a piercing look. “All right, I’m taking that to mean you threatened and coerced an innocent boy into some dictatorial set of rules surrounding Peter, using the power of your money and influence.”

Tony blinked, momentarily speechless at the accuracy of her statement. It took all of five milliseconds for him to regain his cool. Even if Pepper was scarily close to the truth, it wasn’t like he would *admit* it, or anything of that ludicrous nature.

“A questionable summary,” he argued. “The use of the phrase *innocent boy*, in particular, has me feeling obliged to object. That kid willingly wanted to build some *Star Wars* Lego gimmick with Peter - his soul is already beyond repair.”

“You *bought* him that Lego set. I’d argue that makes you the instigator of this corruption of souls.”

“Hey, don’t bring me into this. I had to sacrifice my integrity and everything I stand for to buy the kid that Lego set. Do you know how hard it was to allow myself to be seen, *in public*, purchasing some *Star Wars*- related merchandise? I still haven’t quite recovered.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “You’ll live. An odd sprinkling of public humiliation here and there would be *deeply* beneficial for you. Now, stop avoiding the subject. You threatened and coerced this *innocent* -” She stressed the word with an annoyingly smug expression on her face - “boy into following a set of rules about Peter, am I correct?”

“That’s putting it a bit harshly,” Tony felt obliged to argue. “But yeah, whatever, if it floats your boat. The point is, I was explaining all this to the Ned boy, with more than a little difficulty - that kid has the attention span of a goldfish - and once I finally thought we’d reached a place of peace and harmony, he went and blew it.”

“As in, ruined the moment of peace and harmony?” Pepper repeated disbelievingly. “Are you sure you’re not talking about yourself?”

“No, this one was definitely on Leeds,” Tony told her. “You see, I don’t know if the Avengers have been so kind as to fill you in yet-”

“I’ve been working at SI all weekend. Typical of you to forget that your own company still needs running. But no, Tony, I haven’t been filled in on anything.”

“Well then, allow me to fill that void,” Tony began. He hesitated slightly, wondering how to phrase something so abruptly *shocking*, and whether Pepper’s reaction would be nearly as strong as his had been. Probably not. She was far more collected.

“So there have been some videos circulating around lately,” Tony said, “of this mystery guy who dresses up in a weird get-up that vaguely resembles a spider. This Spider-Man, he’s dubbed himself, goes around stopping muggings, finding diplomatic solutions to fistfights, and saving crazy cat ladies from losing their handbags. You know, typical crime-fighting stuff. And until yesterday, I didn’t even know such a person existed, mostly due to my serious drop in late-night YouTube sessions lately. It’s something of a tragedy. But the point is, Ned brought up this Spider-Man in our conversation yesterday, and using my excellent powers of deductive reasoning, not to mention the kid’s own fat mouth-”

“Peter’s the mystery guy, isn’t he?” Pepper cut in, beating him to the punch.

Tony stared at her mutely for a few seconds. Ordinarily, he would have been incredibly frustrated

that she'd robbed him of the ability to drop such a thrilling bombshell, but as it was, he was far too concerned about the way she would react. Worry was clear in her eyes, along with a distinct curiosity, but neither emotion was overwhelming. Once again, Pepper Potts remained, for the most part, unfazed.

Tony had to admit it. He was a little jealous.

"Yes," he said bluntly, because there was no other way to put it. "The kid's been sneaking around behind our backs for weeks. He did the thing properly - even bought himself a costume when he went shopping with Thor. It looks like a Halloween onesie, mind you, but people seem to like it well enough."

Pepper watched him knowingly, completely ignoring his pathetic attempt at humour and once again cutting straight to the chase. "And let me guess - you were entirely pissed off?"

Tony grimaced, wincing as the painful memory of his unbridled rage resurfaced in his mind. "You could say that, yeah. I obviously went straight to talk to the kid - although the word *talk* is questionable, it kind of ended in full-blown yelling - but after a bit, I regained my dignity, one of my most prized possessions, and we talked it out. And that's when I said the famous words."

"Oh, God," Pepper groaned. " *Please* tell me you did it with at least a few drops of subtlety and self-awareness. Right now I'm picturing a number of tactless scenarios in which you go from screaming at the kid to sitting down, offering him a lollipop, and asking him what he thinks of 'Stark' as a surname."

Tony glared at her. Granted, his adoption speech hadn't been the smoothest or most eloquent of exchanges, but he thought he'd done pretty well, all things considered. Compared to his usual emotionally constipated self, it had been pretty miraculous.

"Once again, you think too little of me, Pep. It was far more classy than that, in my highly-regarded opinion, if *slightly* clumsy on the delivery. But the kid said yes, and that's all that matters."

"It does," Pepper agreed. "I have to admit, that makes me happy to hear."

"Oh, someone document this moment immediately," Tony muttered. "I've pleased her. This is the equivalent of, like, Thor going a day without Pop-Tarts."

"Be quiet, or I'll retract it," Pepper threatened. "And what about the Spider-Man issue? How did you sort that out? Spectacularly messily, or only somewhat messily?"

"Reluctantly," Tony sighed, staring down at his shoes. "Very, *very* reluctantly."

"Elaborate."

"Well, I agreed to let the kid keep doing it," he explained heavily, weighed down by the very gravity of his words. He still hadn't fully accepted that he, himself, had willingly agreed to allow such a thing to continue, especially when the consequences were so terrifyingly dire. "On one condition - we take down HYDRA first."

Pepper raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Take down HYDRA? I get the motive, but that seems - a little far-fetched."

Tony shrugged, clenching his jaw determinedly. "Who says it's far-fetched? We know where their base is, thanks to that time the bastards took Peter and tortured the shit out of him. We know their

weak spots. And even better, we don't have anyone we need to rescue this time; they've got nothing to hold against us. We can go in there, bomb the shit out of the place, make sure there are no survivors, and then leave nothing behind but a smoldering wreck."

Pepper took a moment to respond. Her face seemed slightly paler than usual, and when she finally spoke, it was with unsteadiness. "I know, Tony, but these people...I know what they're capable of, I've seen it firsthand. I don't want something to go wrong and for you all to end up captured, or worse. You and Peter barely recovered from this last time."

"Oh, the kid won't be coming," Tony said, and he'd never been more sure of something in his life. "No fucking way. I refuse to drag him to that hellhole again. If he gets recaptured, I'd never live with myself."

"And if *you* got captured, I'd never live with *myself*," Pepper countered. "I know you did it last time, but you had a way in then. Fake IDs, the HYDRA agents as your cover. And you were forced to. Peter was being held hostage. This time..."

"This time, we won't even have to go in," Tony convinced her. "The plan isn't to extract, it's to destroy."

Pepper still didn't look convinced; when she gazed up at him, there was a pale truth in her eyes. "It's just...what if they destroy you first?"

"Pepper," Tony said, speaking her name gently. "You have to trust me on this. I'll take the whole team in and we'll travel by quinjet. It's the safest we can possibly be." He hesitated for a moment, running his hand through his hair as the words jumbled up in his brain, refusing to come out right. "You just...Pep, you gotta understand - HYDRA, they've been inside my head for months now. They've always been a threat, but ever since Peter, it's just felt like their number one goal is to mess with us, you know? Screw us over, fuck us all up so badly, and it's been *scaring* me. I'm terrified of what they'll do to Peter. As happy as the kid's been lately, I'll never be able to fully rest while they're still out there. While they're still looking for him. Taking them down is the only thing that'll give me peace."

Pepper stared at him for a long moment, hard and conflicted, and he could tell she was debating whether to press the matter further. Tony waited with bated breath, because as much as he hated to admit it, her opinion mattered to him. It mattered a lot, and if she didn't agree with this, it would kill him. He'd go through with it anyway, but it would still kill him, the knowledge that he'd essentially betrayed her trust and better judgment. He'd be able to sleep a lot easier at night if she agreed to this.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, something seemed to deflate within her, and she nodded slowly.

"I know," she said softly. "I know."

Relief crashed down on him, and Tony let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Pep."

She nodded, watching him quite calmly. "Just do me a favour and come back alive. I need you, and more importantly, the kid needs you. Especially now that you're his soon-to-be dad..."

Tony jolted involuntarily. As much as he'd tried to familiarise himself with the concept over the last few weeks, he still couldn't help the instinctive reaction of shock whenever it came up in conversation. He wondered if he'd ever be able to come to terms with it.

*Probably not. You seem to have a supersized issue with commitment.*

Oh, and that reminded him.

“Pep,” Tony said suddenly, his conversation with Ned flowing back to him in all of its glory. “There’s something I forgot to tell you.”

“Oh?” Pepper asked, eyebrows raised expectantly.

Tony stood up off the couch and began to pace around Pepper, feeling far too agitated to sit still anymore. “School. Peter. Peter wants to go to school.”

Pepper stared at him, nonplussed, as though he’d grown two heads. “That....isn’t new, Tony. You’ve told me this before.”

“Yes, but that’s not the point,” Tony said urgently. “*School*, Pepper. The Leeds boy was telling me about this prestigious one downtown - Midtown, it was called. It’s a gifted and talented school for STEM students.”

“Well, that sounds right up Peter’s alley,” Pepper acknowledged, still looking slightly confused. “Maybe once you’ve dealt with HYDRA-”

“No, Pep, but that’s the *problem*,” Tony interrupted frustratedly. “I’ve been thinking about it, right, and it turns out there’s a major obstacle to this whole *school* plan. And adoption plan, for that matter.”

Pepper watched him with concern in her eyes. “I don’t like the sound of this.”

“*His identity*,” Tony emphasised, running a hand through his hair again. “Peter doesn’t have any records. No birth certificate. No identification card. No legal documentation that confirms he is, in fact, a real human. Without his records, we can’t enrol him in a school. Or adopt him. I could probably get my hands on some fake ID if necessary, but that’s not really ideal...”

“Forgery is not the way to go,” Pepper agreed. “The media’s watching your every move. They’re already suspicious enough as it is about Bucky’s escape from the Icebox and the mystery kid you’re allegedly holding hostage here. If it gets out that the kid also had a fake ID made for him, well, it’d be the final nail in the coffin.”

“Shit,” Tony cursed, “I knew this would be a problem. Shit, shit, *shit*. Why the hell didn’t we think of this before?”

“We were too busy trying to overcome your crippling fear of *emotional communication*,” Pepper reminded him dryly. “It’s a good thing we did, though, otherwise you never would have regained your clear-headedness and thus would have never thought of this.”

“Yay, go me,” Tony said sarcastically. “I thought of a problem that we don’t have a solution to. How groundbreaking.”

Pepper shot him an annoyed look. “Maybe if you stopped panicking and gave it some actual thought, a solution would come to mind.”

“Oh yeah?” he challenged, folding his arms. “I don’t see you being hit with any moments of Buddha-worthy enlightenment, Pep. Where the hell do you propose we find Peter’s records? With his parents that probably don’t exist?”



She ignored him, instead staring down at her hands for a minute or two and frowning in concentration. Tony was almost tempted to point out that she was just as petty as he was, trying to prove him wrong by feigning deep thought, when she looked up, intuition clear in her eyes.

*Damn. So she didn't fake that after all.*

"How about HYDRA?"

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"You want to do *what*?"

Tony groaned in frustration, almost tempted to pick up one of the dumbbells in the training room and bash it against his head, purely to alleviate some of the internal agitation he was currently feeling. The solution to HYDRA, to Peter's records, to school, the adoption and *everything* was so close he could practically feel it...but there was just one major obstacle.

The team. Or, more specifically, Bucky Barnes.

If he was being honest, Tony was more than a little miffed he'd had to come to Barnes. Accepting help from people wasn't something he excelled at during the best of times, and when the help-giver was basically intertwined at the hip with Steve Rogers? Well, the humiliation only increased.

"Invade HYDRA," Tony repeated, watching as Bucky performed an impressive chin-up. "I know it sounds counterintuitive--"

"It sounds worse than that, Tony. It sounds like suicide." Groaning, Bucky released his chin-up, hanging loosely from the metal bar as he recovered.. "I know you got lucky once, but to go back a second time? That's too risky. That's a death wish right there."

"Look, I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't absolutely necessary," Tony said, his voice low.

Bucky looked at him sceptically. "Necessary? If you're talking about your quest for vengeance, I'd put that more in the category of *optional*." Straining, he raised himself up again above the metal bar. "My advice, honestly, would just be to forget about it. No point trying to avenge something that's out of your control. Better to just let yourself forget." He dropped low again, and shot Tony a knowing glance. "That's what I do, anyway."

Tony hesitated, well aware that his so-called 'quest for vengeance' probably did appear entirely trivial compared to what Bucky had been through. If Peter's life had been shit, Bucky's life had been the same, but for longer. Tony grudgingly had to admit that the man had come out mostly for the better.

"Look, I know you have a messy history with HYDRA," he said, trying to sound as genuine as his emotional capacity would allow him. "But that's exactly why I came to you."

"Oh yeah?" Bucky asked sceptically, this time dropping off the metal bar altogether. He landed on the hard floor with a wince, brushed himself off, and surveyed Tony thoroughly. "Why wouldn't you just ask Peter? No offence, man, but we aren't exactly best buds."

"None taken," Tony told him. Glancing around to make sure they were alone, he turned back to Bucky and lowered his voice. "It's because this concerns Peter, Barnes. You're right, you know. I can't deny it - I do want vengeance. But I'm not stupid enough to go back on a quest for justice alone."

At this, Bucky frowned, and he took a step closer to Tony, eyes full of authentic concern. “What about Peter? Did HYDRA send a death threat, or something? Are they coming back for him?”

Even at the mere notion of it, Tony couldn’t suppress his wince of horror. “*No* . No, nothing that drastic,” he reassured Bucky. “Not yet, at least. This is more just a combination of...domestic factors.”

“Such as?” Bucky asked curiously.

Tony let out a long breath, listing them off on his fingers as he went. “Well, first off, the Spider-Man thing. As you know, Peter is currently in the habit of going AWOL several nights a week, swinging around on his webs and attracting all sorts of attention. If HYDRA finds those videos, I’m worried that they’ll put two and two together and come for him.”

Bucky considered this for a moment, thinking hard. “Fair enough. I guess you’ll try and get Peter to stop, then?”

“Yeah, but the kid’s insistent. He wants to keep doing it. The only solution seems to be to take HYDRA out of the equation.” Pausing, Tony rolled out the tension in his shoulders before continuing to tick off the items. “Then there’s the adoption. I haven’t actually told the team this yet, so you should feel honoured, by the way, but...well, I finally told Peter I want to adopt him. Only problem is, we’ve hit an issue. At the interview, they’ll probably ask for his records, which we do not currently possess. And what I’m thinking is...”

Tony trailed off, allowing the silence to speak for itself. He couldn’t deny that Bucky wasn’t at least somewhat intellectually sound, and sure enough, he could practically see the cogs turning in the other man’s brain as he put the pieces together. After a few moments, the realisation dawned across his face.

“They’ll be at HYDRA,” he finished.

Tony nodded. “And we need them for his school enrollment, too. That’s the third reason.” He broke off, watching Bucky anxiously, who had a curious look on his face. “What? Do you think they’ll be there? I’m kinda banking on your dark past to answer these questions, Barnes.”

Bucky took a moment to answer, avoiding Tony’s gaze for several long, drawn-out seconds. Finally, he made eye contact.

“Oh, they’ll be there,” he said. “In fact, I know exactly where. If the base in New Mexico is anything like my own in Siberia, they’ll be in the archives room, deep underground in the most protected part of the base. The same area where they held Peter hostage, I think, but further back in the complex. The tricky part will be getting to them.”

“Can you do it?” Tony asked urgently. “Could we break in and get them? Without the fake IDs like last time?”

Bucky hesitated, thinking carefully. “It’s possible,” he admitted finally. “But only with one hell of a distraction to keep the agents occupied. Something at the front of the base, something to cause enough chaos that we can slip in unnoticed at the back entrance. Which, by the way, will require a small explosion. The only way you’re getting through those doors without a HYDRA ID on you is with an immense amount of force. So long story short, you’re gonna need an explosion big enough to cover up the smaller explosion occurring around the back.”

Tony knew he should have felt trepidation at Bucky’s words, but ironically enough, he couldn’t

help but smile. Relief flooded through him, because this, at least, he could work with. This was old territory. This was ground he'd covered a million times before.

"A few explosions?" he smirked at Bucky. "You're talking to the right guy, Barnes."

"Right, I forgot," Bucky muttered. "Your unnatural soft spot for all things destructive."

"Round up the team," Tony announced. "We're going HYDRA-hunting."

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Sometimes, Peter thought that Tony forgot he used to be a crazy HYDRA spy-assassin-type-person, and that he could do all the things that crazy HYDRA spy-assassin-type-people could do. Like sneak around. Without anyone hearing him, not even the two residential super-soldiers. And listen to conversations he wasn't supposed to be listening to (also known as eavesdropping, but Peter was going to ignore that in favour of getting mad at the Avengers for holding a secret team meeting without him - the *audacity* ).

So that was how he had found out about their little HYDRA takedown that they'd planned. Without telling him. Peter couldn't get over how rude that was.

"Okay, is everyone ready?" Steve asked, and the Avengers, who were seated around him in various positions, all nodded. They were in a conference room on the floor below their quarters, and Peter, having followed them there, was hiding just outside the door, which had foolishly been left half-open. Amateurs. Not that he would have needed the door open to hear them (sometimes having super hearing was *awesome* ), but it sure did make his life easier. "Tony has brought to my attention that now may be the best chance we'll have to take down HYDRA once and for all. Thanks to various efforts, mostly our own, they're weaker than ever before and have retreated back to their main base for some much-needed re-grouping, or at least that's what Fury has told me. That means, they're all in the same place, no need to go trekking all over the world to eradicate every last branch."

"But how do we know where their main base is?" Clint interrupted.

"Because," Steve replied, "we've already been there, thanks to... the Peter incident."

Oh, that was him. He was Peter. He was already instrumental to this plan and they *still* hadn't invited him. So rude.

"*That* shithole where they kept Peter was their main base? Okay, now I get why we aren't telling the kid," Rhodey muttered.

*Ouch, man, ouch* , Peter thought scathingly.

"We've also got to go there to retrieve Peter's records," Tony chimed in, and Peter jolted. They were going to find his records and *didn't* think it necessary to fill him in on that little plan? They were going to find out who he really was, his actual *identity before HYDRA*, and still hadn't bothered to tell him?

"Because I can't adopt him if he legally doesn't exist in the eyes of the state, and schools won't consider admitting him if we can't provide records either," Tony went on. "Bucky says they'll be

stored in the archive room, and because we're so lucky, it's in the deepest part of the base, which means we'll need a big distraction at the front, preferably one with lots of explosions and big noises. While that's happening, our stealth team, consisting of Natasha, Clint and Bucky, will sneak around the back and blow out those doors before entering and retrieving the records. Once they're secure, we'll beat a hasty retreat on the quinjet, drop a couple of bombs on our way out, and then wipe our hands of their mess. Easy peasy lemon squeezy," Tony said, sounding remarkably calm for someone who was planning not just an attack, but a recovery mission, on one of the biggest and most powerful criminal organisations in the world.

"Will, uh, Code Green be necessary?" Bruce questioned, trepidation coating his words.

"Assuming we're blessed with the best circumstances, no," Steve answered. "Nat's going to be in the bowels of the building, so if we need you to come back, we may have to physically restrain the Hulk, which we don't want to do. If all goes well you'll stay in the quinjet and act as our eyes in the sky." Bruce let out a long sigh of relief. "Does everyone understand the plan? Yes? Good. We'll rehash it on the flight over. Everyone get suited up, we'll be wheels up in thirty minutes."

"How do you expect us to leave without telling Peter?" Sam asked, a note of disapproval in his voice. The man had been abnormally quiet throughout the briefing, and Peter wondered if he was against leaving him behind. Not that that was going to happen. He'd stowaway on the quinjet if necessary.

"Uh, well, we figured... maybe we'd just leave a note?"

Peter's mouth dropped open. They were going on a mission to finally destroy HYDRA once and for all and retrieve his records *without* telling him, and they just thought they'd leave a *note* about it? The. Audacity.

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Wanda piped up, her voice clear and slightly amused. "He already knows."

Peter cursed. Damn Wanda and her stupid, wizardy brain powers.

"Wanda! Why didn't you tell us he was listening?" Tony admonished.

"I don't think it's right to leave him behind when this is an issue that he's directly related to. If it were me, I'd want to come."

Peter silently thanked her before stepping into the conference room, knowing he had at least one person who agreed with him.

"You guys were just gonna leave a note before you fly off to a random HYDRA base, completely ditching me?" Peter said, his voice rising embarrassingly as he took in the half-shocked, half-frustrated faces of the Avengers. "Rude. Really rude. Wanda's right, did it not occur to you guys that I might, uh, I dunno, want to help destroy the organisation that ruined my life? Was that just not something that you thought about?"

"We did think about it, Pete," Tony said through gritted teeth. "And we decided we can't risk it. You're at the top of HYDRA's hitlist. We talked about this, kiddo, remember? We don't know if they'll even bother taking you in again. If they catch you, that could be *it*, and we - and *I* - can't live with that option. You're not coming, end of discussion."

"No, no, *no*, not end of discussion," Peter shot back hotly, a red tinge creeping up his face as it always did when he got mad. "These guys destroyed the first fifteen years of my life, and I will

never, ever rest unless I see their gruesome downfall, Tony. I need to see it, please.”

“We can video it for you if you really need to see it, kid, but that’s as close as you’ll ever get.”

“You’re going to get *my* records. I have a right to be there, and I’d rather die than let you go and stick your necks out for something that’ll benefit me if I’m not even there to help!”

“Well if you do go, you very well might die! It’s not happening, Peter. You’re not coming.”

“Yes I am. I know the plan already-”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, from *eavesdropping* .”

“And I could be a valuable asset to the team,” Peter continued, ignoring Tony’s jab. He knew the man was scared, but the over-protectiveness was starting to get old. “I grew up in that base, I’ll know the ins and outs better than Bucky does. HYDRA bases are similar, yes, but not identical.”

“Squirt’s got a point,” Clint murmured to Nat, and Tony flapped a hand in his direction. Peter could see the growing resignation in Tony’s features, as if he was coming to accept that maybe Peter would have to come. The entire team was already persuaded, Peter could see it in their faces; all he needed was for Tony to agree. He just had to come up with one more point to knock the remaining determination out of Tony’s brain, but he was out of ideas.

Luckily for Peter, Sam was not. “I think it’s a good idea, Tony. Going back to the place where it all happened and seeing it end with his own eyes, it’ll be like a kind of closure, and closure is important in any trauma case. Coming with us will be good for him.”

Tony slumped, and there, in that simple motion, Peter detected defeat. “Fine. Fine, he can go. I’m assuming everyone expects him to be part of the stealth team?” Tony relented, sounding tired and sad - Peter almost felt guilty. The Avengers nodded, and Tony turned to Nat, Clint, and Bucky, who were huddled together and discussing tactics. “You three better keep an eye on him, keep him safe, you know how it goes. At least one of you with him at all times, preferably all of you, actually. That’s my condition. If he goes, at least one of you with him at all times.”

Peter rolled his eyes at the unnecessary precaution, but didn’t verbally object. He could tell Tony wasn’t going to budge on that, and besides, it wasn’t like he particularly wanted to sneak away from his team. He wasn’t *that* stupid.

“Ok...” Steve said, glancing awkwardly between Tony and Peter. “Well, suit up everyone. Rendezvous at the hanger in twenty-five minutes, wheels up in thirty.”

Everyone gradually filtered out, but Peter and Tony remained behind, locked in a weird little staring contest that was making Peter super uncomfortable, especially because he was vibrating with an odd mix of excitement and nerves.

After a few tense minutes of silence, Tony spoke up. “Kid, I - I never go into a fight with any unresolved conflict. Past experiences have taught me exactly why that’s a bad idea. Look - I’m sorry, okay, if I made you feel like I thought you couldn’t handle it, or something. I’m just, you know-”

“Worried,” Peter finished. “I get it, Tony. How do you think I would have felt if I found out that you guys were going off to fight HYDRA through a *note* ?

Tony winced. “Not my finest moment, I’ll agree.”

“It’s just, I need to do this, okay? I can’t really properly explain why, but I *need* to do this.”

“I got you. You’re a good, kid, you know?” Tony said, slinging an arm around Peter’s shoulders and pulling him out of the stuffy conference room. “You’re my kid,” the man muttered quietly, and Peter just smiled, burying his head in Tony’s chest. “Now, I was going to save this for after we took down HYDRA, but I found your plans, or rather, FRIDAY showed them to me.”

“What plans?” Peter asked, genuine confusion on his face.

“For a better Spider-Man suit,” Tony clarified, and Peter’s eyes widened comically, making the man chuckle. “Yeah, they were incredible, honestly think you could be at MIT by now, kid, but we’ll keep you on the normal track, shall we? Anyway, I was fiddling around with them a little, and kind of zoned out. Before I knew it, there was a finished Spider-Man suit in front of me, looking patriotic as fuck in red and blue - I’m a little offended you didn’t choose red and gold for your colour scheme, by the way - and yeah...”

Peter gaped at Tony. He’d completely forgotten about the plans he’d made for a new and improved Spider-Man suit. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously. It’s in the lab right now if you want to go and grab it. You know, maybe rock up to HYDRA in something other than your PJs, underoos.”

“Hey! I was working with a budget. Not much you can do with thirty-three dollars and seventy-nine cents.”

“Well I definitely didn’t have a budget, so I added a few more things of my own design as well. Spruced up that Karen code too, which reminds me, why would you name an AI Karen? Is it an acronym? Explain, please.”

“I just liked the name,” Peter said, before giggling and ducking out from underneath Tony’s arm a second before the elevator doors opened. “Thank you so much!” He yelled as he jogged towards the lab, and his new suit.

This was going to be *so cool* .

~~~

Tony couldn’t help but feel a foreboding sense of déjà vu as he set the destination on the quinjet for New Mexico. For the second time this year. Once this was over, he was never setting foot in that godforsaken state again. No hard feelings against its inhabitants, or anything - it just held far too many deeply scarring memories.

And he’d only been there *once* (soon to be twice) .

Imagine how the kid’s feeling right now.

It was on the forefront of his mind as the Avengers boarded the quinjet and waited, mostly in mutely determined silence, as the two-hour flight ran its course. Steve tried to run through the plan a few more times, in his typically over-prepared style, but it was entirely futile. Nobody was listening, far too caught up in their own nerves and anticipation. Even Steve himself seemed oddly half-hearted as he recited the details of the aerial attack and the simultaneous movements of the stealth team, which would hopefully go unnoticed.

The tension in the quinjet was so overbearing, you could practically *taste* it.

And Tony couldn't stop thinking about Peter.

He knew it had been the kid's choice to come here. Hell, Peter had used every last inch of his persuasive techniques to make that happen - and even now, Tony was questioning it all, questioning his decision to let the kid come. He knew it was *right* in the sense that it was fair to Peter; Sam was right, the kid did need closure, and it would be cruel to leave him out of such a pivotal moment for the battle against HYDRA, a battle that the kid had been fighting longer than any of them (save for Bucky and Steve). Certainly, he'd suffered the most trauma at their hands, second only to Barnes, probably. It was only fair that the kid got to dole out some well-deserved justice.

But once again, that irrational, crippling, all-consuming fear was gripping his insides, swamping all rational thought and totally clouding any judgments about Peter's need for justice. Tony knew the kid could handle himself - he'd seen it first-hand. He knew what Peter was capable of, and with his new suit, the badassery had only increased. But still, the fear monster churned inside him, twisting his gut uncomfortably, because it didn't matter how many times he told himself that *Peter was ready for this*. It would all come to nothing if something happened, if he was standing in the wrong place at just the wrong moment, if Peter's heart stopped for a second time-

And didn't start again.

Jesus, think much darker and you'll turn into a HYDRA assassin yourself.

Shaking off these troubling thoughts, Tony moved over to where Peter was leaning against the wall of the quinjet, slightly separated from the rest of the Avengers. Tony swallowed, overcome by a sudden, overwhelming desire just to *feel* the kid's touch, to sense his heartbeat, to know that he was still okay, that he was alive and breathing and not terrifyingly dead and unmoving. He stood next to the kid and slung an arm around his shoulders. Peter looked up at him and leaned into his embrace, just a little.

Neither of them spoke.

The kid's breathing was enough.

After a painstaking amount of time had passed, Bruce's voice finally came from the controls of the quinjet. "Okay, we're approaching the hostile zone. Five minutes till we reach our target, guys."

"Alright everyone, into your positions," Steve announced, as the team all jolted into action. "As soon as we're within range of HYDRA's scoping cameras, they'll start shooting at us with everything we have. Stealth team, no time to drop you off. You're gonna have to jump as we discussed and circle round the back."

"That's your cue, kid," Tony murmured to Peter. He looked down at the kid and the kid looked right back, and in that moment, Tony wondered if Peter could see how fucking terrified he was.

"It's gonna be okay," Peter told him, and Tony could tell this was more for his benefit than the kid's. Apparently he *had* noticed. "I'll be okay."

Tony swallowed down the lump in his throat, trying to keep the terror at bay. He couldn't remember how he'd managed to suppress all these panicked feelings in the past; right now, staying calm felt as easy as lifting Thor's hammer.

"I know," Tony told him, and without thinking, he quickly pulled Peter in for a hug. The kid didn't

protest this time, instead relaxing in Tony's arms and returning the embrace. Tony could feel Peter's heart beating steadily against his chest, and it helped him to focus.

"Hey, dickheads," came Clint's annoyed voice. "Look, I get it, the joys of being an almost father and son and whatnot, but can you save the touchy-feely for another day? The clock is ticking and we've gotta move."

"Can it, Barton," Tony said, stepping aside so that Peter could join Natasha, Clint and Bucky, who were preparing to exit the quinjet from the air. "Focus on opening your chute properly, because I've had to replace the sixty-three Wii controllers you've broken, so I know your touch isn't exactly gentle in high-pressure situations."

Clint flipped him off just as the back door of the quinjet opened, revealing the gaping starry night sky and, below that, a dark forest of trees. To the left, standing in all of its foreboding glory, was the stone escarpment that Tony knew concealed all number of horrors within. He felt another thrilling rush of fear - not for himself, but for Peter - and a sudden urge to stop the kid overcame him, so crushingly strong that he actually felt a cry building in his throat-

But then they jumped, and the kid was gone.

Tony swallowed past the dryness in his mouth and fought back a wave of terror-induced nausea.

Just focus on your own damn job. If you don't do your job, the kid's likelihood of dying goes from unlikely to certain.

Tony hurried over to the controls, taking charge of the offensive panel as Bruce continued to maneuver the quinjet until they were in direct firing line of the base. The rest of the team crowded behind them, anxiously watching the screens that displayed grainy images of their surroundings from all directions.

"Not yet, Tony," Steve warned him, obviously sensing his apprehension. "Wait till Peter and the others are out of sight of the firing line-"

"I know, Cap, it's under control," Tony muttered through gritted teeth. His fingers were hovering over the *deploy* button, practically itching to hit the damn thing until it exploded itself.

He'd never wanted to blow something up so badly. And considering his soft spot for mindless distraction, that was really saying something.

"Okay, they've made it to the back of the base," Rhodey noticed, pointing to where they could just see four figures moving in the dark. If Tony hadn't known they were there, there was no way he would have been able to spot them.

"We're in position," Bruce said. "Light 'em up, Tony."

Tony didn't hesitate. Ramming his fingers into the deploy button, he felt a thrill of almost sadistic satisfaction jolt through him in response, electrifying his insides. The missiles that he'd pre-loaded onto the quinjet released, silent and deadly, and within a few milliseconds they made contact.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

The explosions reverberated loudly off the stone walls of the base, and a tremendous shudder took hold of the quinjet as a shock wave rebounded back towards them. Tony glanced up at the camera panels and saw, with grim satisfaction, that the missiles had perfectly hit the mark.

The towering stone wall, which had previously seemed entirely unmoveable and unbreakable, had exploded outwards into millions of pieces of charred rock. The entire front half of the HYDRA base erupted into dazzling flames, the fire roaring and raging as it consumed the interior of the place that had caused so much human suffering, and Tony had to admit. There was a certain beauty to the devastation of it all.

“Suck on that, you bastards,” he muttered. Already, the sounds of distress were obvious; sirens were wailing, agents were screaming, alarms were blaring, orders were being frantically issued. It was complete chaos, and the panic was music to Tony’s ears.

This, at least, provided him with a small degree of comfort. There was no way the HYDRA agents could possibly have noticed Peter and the others slipping in through the back of the base.

“Look at them all,” Sam said, pointing out a group of HYDRA agents visibly trying to extinguish one of the less furious fires. “Feeling the burn.”

“I must say, I’m taking immense pleasure in this,” Thor commented darkly.

“There’s definitely a poetic justice to it all,” Rhodey agreed. “It’s like fate was-”

“*Guys, shut up!*” Steve yelled suddenly, and the urgency in his voice once more sent the crippling fear surging through Tony, churning over him in nauseating waves, because if there was one thing Tony had learned about Steve Rogers, it was that *he always stayed calm*. He didn’t yell unless absolutely necessary. As in, *our lives are in danger* kind of necessary.

“Look,” Steve went on, pointing a shaking finger at one of the camera screens.

Tony’s heart plummeted to the floor as his eyes focused on the footage projected on the panel. On the very corner of the HYDRA base, in a small refuge spot that miraculously hadn’t been destroyed, a group of armed agents were exiting into the open forest that surrounded.

“They know,” Bruce realised, putting the pieces together along with Tony. “They’ve realised it’s a diversion, they’ve realised we’re avoiding the back of the base. They can’t get through inside because of the fire, so they’re-”

“Circling around outside, to get to the back,” Tony finished, feeling sick. “If they get in that way, there’s nothing standing between them and the stealth team.”

“Then we better keep them in front of us,” Steve muttered.

There was a heavy pause in which they exchanged terse, determined glances.

And then, as a single, simultaneous unit, the team bolted into action.

Tony and Rhodey put their suits on in quick succession, before grabbing Steve (the only team member left who couldn’t fly) and securing their grip around him.

“Bruce, open the doors for us and keep dropping bombs like hell,” Tony instructed. “Avoid the back parts at all costs. We’ll call you down if we’re desperate, but we should be able to handle them.”

“Got it,” Bruce nodded, and jabbed a button on the controls panel. Instantly, the back doors of the quinjet groaned open for the second time. Tony activated his flight power, felt Rhodey do the same, and they zoomed out into the night carrying Steve between them, with Wanda, Vision, Sam and Thor right behind them.

They hit the forest ground in front of the HYDRA squad, forming a defensive wall that barricaded off the latter half of the base. Tony quickly gauged their opponents - at least fifty of them, probably more, all highly-trained in elite level combat based on the weaponry they carried, and looking entirely murderous.

It was lucky Tony was in a violent mood.

The first agents came charging at them and the Avengers burst into action. Tony activated his repulsors and started firing, again and again, shooting in every direction and not even caring if he was killing some of his enemies in the process. He was way beyond the point of neutrally subduing by now, because these people had taken Peter. These people were the sole reason for the kid's fucked-up childhood, for the nightmares, for the panic attacks. These were the people that had had the audacity to capture the kid a second time, to fuck with his mind again, to torture him to near-death. These were the people that terrified the *shit* out of Tony Stark, and he hated them for it.

Who could blame him, really, for enjoying the sweet taste of revenge?

Thor's hammer was flying, Wanda's scarlet light was flashing, Steve's shield was glinting in the moonlight. Sam was firing guns and throwing punches and Vision was sending jets of white-hot light in every direction. Rhodey and Tony were firing repulsor blast after repulsor blast, and as each HYDRA agent hit the ground, either unconscious or entirely dead, all Tony could think was: *was it enough?*

Blast.

An agent that had been charging at him abruptly flew backwards, crashing into a tree and slumping, unmoving, to the ground.

Blast.

Had they been quick enough? Was this all for nothing? What if some agents had already found a way to the back of the base?

Blast.

Another man fell, screaming, the ground.

Had they bought enough time? Would they be able to hold HYDRA off?

Blast. Blast.

Had the others already been caught? Were they already being dragged off to their doom?

Blast. Blast. Blast.

Were they too late?

Blast. Blast. Blast. Blast.

Had he lost his son for good?

The night air was chilly, biting his skin through his new (*super, super cool*) suit, despite the fact that New Mexico was supposed to be warm, according to the incredibly reliable weather site he'd checked just before they left. He may have been raised in the state, but he hadn't left the HYDRA base for the first seven years of his life, and once he did, observing the weather patterns hadn't actually been his top priority.

The pine needles that were scattered across the ground masked the soft thump that the stealth team made when they landed, and they stashed their parachutes quickly and silently. Peter had activated the stealth mode on his suit just before they jumped out of the plane, and had watched in fascination as the bright red and blue hues faded into a matte black, completely absorbing the minimal light that was able to fight its way through the thick tree branches above their heads.

Clint, who was also dressed in all-black, looked at him. "Pretty freaky, kid," he muttered. "Remember to stick with me."

Peter just nodded, not daring to speak. Now that he was here, he could *feel* it. The cloying sensation of gloom and terror that hung in the air, making it hard to breathe, like he was trying to suck jelly through a straw.

The hooks that had faded to nothing in the past few months were back, and he almost fell prey to their unexpected tugs, purely because he wasn't ready to fight them. Memories flashed before his eyes; blood, seeping and viscous, staining his hands and his mind. A gun in his hands, the metal cold against the pads of his fingers - he could feel the notch in the handle that he'd made a few weeks ago while staking out a house on a mission. Mousy's eyes, blank and glazed over as he met his end on the chilled concrete of the HYDRA base with only a stranger to ease him through to the other side.

But then they were moving, slinking through the darkness like shadows, terrifying figments of a young child's imagination. There was silence, the occasional brush of light footsteps against the soft ground, and Peter's mind *whirled* .

It was starting to hit him - the gravity of what they were doing. He was going to break into the place where he'd been tortured, manipulated, and brainwashed, so that he could find out who he *was* , really. Not just the identity he'd created for himself, but who he was born as. He'd find out his real name, his birthday - Tony had promised him he'd have the best first birthday ever.

Perhaps most importantly, he'd find out if he had anyone waiting for him to come home, and that was the real question, wasn't it?

If he did have a family out there, waiting, hoping that their long-lost-son was still alive, what would he do with that information? He already *had* a family, and he loved them more than anything, but if these new people were his flesh and blood, did that mean he *had* to go live with them? Would he have to leave the Avengers for a group of strangers?

And then he thought of Tony. The way the man had called him his kid earlier today, the terrified look in his eye as Peter leapt out of the plane, the love that was written all over his face whenever they locked eyes, even if he was too scared to say it most of the time. He thought of how the man was the only one who could calm him down from a panic attack, or after a nightmare. He thought about how Tony had stayed up night after night to read him *Harry Potter* , putting his own sleep aside to ensure Peter got enough.

Tony was his family. Tony was his... his *dad* . The man was about to adopt him for Christ's sake, and Peter wasn't about to leave him in the dust for a group of people that he had never met before.

But then he realised, all of this speculation was hypothetical, and it all hinged on one big thing. *If*.

If he had a family. *If* they hadn't handed him over to HYDRA (and that old fear had come crawling right back. Was he so undesirable that his own mother and father would rather have him tortured and used as a weapon than keep him?). *If* they were even still alive.

If.

If.

If.

Sometimes, Peter was tired of all the questions and dangling hypotheticals that dominated his life, but he'd get a whole lot of answers very soon, if everything went well.

And then there was that dreaded *if* again, because this was dangerous territory that he and the others were heading into. They weren't exactly a lucky bunch - probably had less than the average person between the four of them - and this was a situation that would require quite a bit of luck.

"Everyone's got their comms switched on, right?" Natasha whispered, her voice so quiet it could almost have been mistaken for a slight breeze. Peter's hand ghosted up to check that the small device was still in his ear, and then nodded along with Bucky and Clint. "Okay, from here on out, no talking unless absolutely necessary. We're one hundred meters from the back doors. Once we hear the others drop the bomb out front, we'll move."

They waited in the shadows silently, anticipation mingling with the heavy aura of sorrow in the air. Peter saw Bucky twitch nervously, and realised that the man was probably just as, if not more, nervous than himself. They were finally going to take out the organisation that had destroyed both of their lives, but there was a solid possibility that it'd be the *last* thing they ever did.

Clint shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The breeze ruffled Natasha's short hair, and then...

BOOM!

The explosion was loud and deafening, and the four of them wasted no time crouching down to prepare for the oncoming shockwave. It rippled painfully through Peter, and then they moved, trying desperately to ignore the instant chaos that followed the blast.

But there were flames and screams and alarms, and it was all Peter could focus on. The scent of smoke in his nostrils and blistering heat on his skin. Wailing, wailing, wailing. Was it a person in anguish or a warning alarm that had been set off too late to do any good?

Tugging. Someone was tugging on his arm, and Peter jerked out of his trance to see Clint pulling him towards the back doors, which had been blasted open by Natasha. How had he missed that? Maybe Tony was right to be scared, and maybe Sam was wrong. Maybe he wasn't ready for this.

But, no. He knew he could do this. He needed to do this. He deserved to know who he was, even if he didn't like the results.

They crept inside. The alarms, which were no longer blaring, flashed silently, casting haunting, red shadows along the walls. Their footsteps echoed along the deserted hallway, and if Peter wasn't so terrified, he'd be marvelling at how cliché the whole thing was. This was typical horror movie stuff right here. Ned would freak when Peter told him.

The diversion seemed to have worked, because they met no one on their way to the archive rooms, with Peter leading the way through winding hallways and down steep, echoing stairwells.

The archive room itself was just as Peter remembered it. He'd only been down there a few times in his HYDRA days, but it hadn't changed in all the years he'd known of its existence. A huge, cavernous room on the very lowest level of the base, with rows upon rows of shelves, stacked with boxes in teetering piles that nearly reached the ceiling. Everything was coated in a permanent layer of dust, and Peter sometimes wondered if HYDRA added the stuff to create some sort of creepy atmosphere, because there was just no way so much dust could accumulate in one place, especially with the number of people that usually came in and out every day.

They entered the room with weapons drawn, feet light and cautious on the ground. Anything could be hiding behind one of the shelves. They split into pairs and searched the entire place, but found nothing, and now Peter was starting to get suspicious because this was just *too easy*.

His life had been anything *but* easy so far, and there was no way the universe had suddenly decided to change that now, so he remained alert as they searched through the rows, looking for anything related to him. The process sped up a little when they realised everything was organised alphabetically - again, *too easy*.

But nothing seemed out of the ordinary. His spider sense was relatively quiet - only a low hum at the nape of his neck, and that was to be expected, given he was standing in the half-destroyed ruins of the one place that had caused him more pain than anywhere else.

They found his file in the A section, labelled 'Asset, AKA the Spider' and Peter's face burned with shame at the pitying looks that Natasha and Clint sent him. He hadn't told anyone that he used to be Asset. Just Asset. Nothing but Asset.

He assumed that the name was meant to be some sort of dehumanisation tactic, but it had ended up becoming a part of him.

Once he escaped, he'd been excited to choose a different name for himself, but everything felt wrong because Asset had been *his* for so long. Finding something else felt like he was breaking some sort of unspoken rule. But then he'd stumbled across the name *Peter* all those months ago, in a children's book that he'd fished out of a dumpster, of all things. 'Peter' had felt right, and so he'd claimed the name as his own, and that had been his first step towards becoming a *person*. His own person. He liked the name Peter, and when they opened that file and discovered his real name, well, he wasn't sure what he'd think of it.

Clint fished the yellowing file out of the box, and Peter raised an eyebrow at how thick it was. It must have *everything* in it. A chronicle of his life, his missions, all his sins, all his faults - everything. He took it from the older man with trembling fingers.

It still hadn't quite sunk in yet, the magnitude of what he was about to do, of what he was about to see. In his hands he had the answers to hundreds of questions that he had about himself, and it seemed like such a bizarre notion. He was so used to the *not-knowing* that suddenly being able to know felt strange.

With Clint looking over his shoulder (that man had no concept of personal space) and Bucky and Natasha standing at a respectful distance, half watching him and half keeping guard, Peter flipped the file open.

The first page was a photocopy of a birth certificate. *His* birth certificate, and his real name-

“No *fucking* way,” Clint breathed, and Peter had to say that he agreed. Because his name was *actually* , *legally* , Peter.

Peter Parker.

He weighed it in his mind, rolled it around on his tongue. It was a good name, he decided. Peter Parker. It was even, two syllables per word, and there was alliteration. He liked names with alliteration, like Bruce Banner, and Pepper Potts. *Peter Parker* . *He was Peter Parker* .

“Hey, look at that, squirt. You’re definitely fifteen. Almost sixteen, actually, in three months. We’re going to have to throw you an awesome party!” Clint said in an attempt to be cheerful, but Peter couldn’t bring himself to feel anything except slightly hysterical disbelief.

He felt like he was filled with both helium and lead, three seconds from simultaneously floating away into the night and sinking through the floor. He was Peter Parker. After so long - fifteen years and nine months according to his birth certificate - without an identity, having one thrust upon him so suddenly was a little disorientating.

Bucky and Nat had drifted over now too, apparently trusting that they were alone in the archive room, and were peering curiously over the edge of the file. Peter had to resist the urge to snatch it away from their gazes, suddenly feeling oddly possessive. It was *his* . These... these pieces of paper held every piece of him, and having anyone else looking at them made him feel sick, exposed and vulnerable.

His eyes travelled down the paper, and landed on the names of his parents. Mary and Richard Parker. He didn’t know what to do with that information.

Here he was, having been presented with information that he had been desperate to know for *months* , and he was frozen.

Peter couldn’t bear to stare at his birth certificate any longer, so he flipped the page, and was met with a simple list on an otherwise blank piece of paper.

Richard Parker (Father) - Status:

~~ACTIVE 6 DEC 1991~~

~~TRAITOR 10 AUG 2004~~

TERMINATED 21 NOV 2005

Mary Parker (Mother) - Status:

~~ACTIVE 18 JAN 1994~~

~~TRAITOR 10 AUG 2004~~

TERMINATED 21 NOV 2005

Ben Parker (Uncle) - Status:

~~MONITORED 10 AUG 2001~~

DEAD 11 JUNE 2015

May Parker (Aunt) - Status:

~~*MONITORED 10 AUG 2001*~~

DEAD 11 JUNE 2015

A shaky inhale.

Exhale.

Why was the air so thick? Silence shouldn't be loud, yet it so often was. No one spoke. No one breathed. But Peter's brain never stopped, and it knew what every single one of those words on that page meant. They told him more than he'd ever known before about his family.

His parents had been HYDRA operatives, right up until his third birthday, when he'd been taken, perhaps... forcefully, by HYDRA, if the 'traitor' status meant anything. Did that mean that his parents had wanted him? Had he not been the burden to them that he'd been brought up to believe he was?

But in the end, it didn't matter if they wanted Peter, because they were dead. Terminated, and he knew what that was code for. Murdered. By HYDRA. Most likely for defecting.

And his Aunt and Uncle, who hadn't known anything about any of this. They had merely been monitored since the day he was born, apparently, until they too had died. What was it, Peter wondered, that had taken the last of his family away? A car crash? A shooting? A freak accident?

He didn't know.

There was so much he didn't know, despite all the new information he'd just uncovered.

He didn't know the smell of his mother's perfume, or how his father would have hugged him. He didn't know if they could cook, or play an instrument, or paint. He didn't know if his aunt liked to bake, or if his uncle made funny jokes.

And so Peter mourned.

He mourned the loss of people he had never known, but had wanted to, oh so desperately. He mourned the life that was stolen from him and the childhood innocence that he never got to experience, let alone savour.

But HYDRA never let him be. They never left him alone, and that wasn't about to stop now, because suddenly, Peter's spider sense spiked, sending horrifying shivers down the back of his neck and his spine.

Peter turned, alarmed - he *knew* that this whole thing was too easy. Too simple. His eyes met the dark, blank gaze of one of the Winter Soldiers - a woman this time, her blonde hair pulled back into a slick ponytail - but she wasn't looking at him.

Instead, her dead, unfeeling eyes were focused on Bucky, who was standing slightly behind him, completely unaware of the danger. Peter saw the gun a second before she pulled the trigger, and he lunged just in time to push Bucky straight into Natasha. The three of them fell to the floor, and Bucky smashed his head against the metal corner of the shelf with a clang that made Peter shiver. With the impact of his shoulder on the rough ground came the realisation that Peter wasn't the

only one that HYDRA wanted to recapture.

“Nat! Take Bucky, get him out of here! HYDRA wants him just as much as they want me!” Peter yelled, and the woman hesitated slightly, but then a second bullet buried itself in a shelf inches from her head. “Go! I’ll cover you!” he cried, and Natasha’s eyes flicked to Clint, who was scrambling to pull his bow out, before she nodded.

Peter leapt at the Winter Soldier and wrapped his legs around her neck. It was distracting enough that Nat was able to pull a still-dazed Bucky away and out the door of the archive room.

The Winter Soldier bucked Peter off, and he went flying into a shelf. The metal dented around his back and he grunted in pain.

That’s gonna leave a mark.

“Peter!” Clint yelled, and Peter struggled out of the pile of boxes that had fallen on top of him when he’d smashed into the shelf. The Winter Soldier was advancing upon Clint, and Peter’s heart lurched. He could see the man’s beloved bow lying in pieces on the concrete, and that meant Clint was left very much defenseless while an enhanced individual backed him into a corner.

Clint was entirely human. Clint wouldn’t survive against the Winter Soldier, especially without his bow, no matter how skilled he was in hand-to-hand combat. Peter however, *was* enhanced, and so he made his choice.

He took a running leap and jumped clear over the Winter Soldier’s head, planting himself between Clint and the oncoming threat. “Go, Clint, run!”

“Are you crazy, squirt? I’m not going to ditch you, Tony will probably kill me!”

“And this chick will *definitely* kill you if you don’t go now! You don’t have a weapon, and you’re human. I can take her, trust me, but I can’t have half my focus on keeping you safe!”

Clint looked torn, but Peter knew he had won. The man could see the logic behind the words.

“Fine, okay. But you better come out of here alive, or Tony *will* murder me. Promise me, Parker,” Clint relented, his tone somber.

Peter smiled at the use of his last name (*his last name!*) and nodded before jerking his head towards the door and then jumping into combat with the Winter Soldier. She was waiting, fists ready and swinging at him as soon as he was within range. His spider sense served him well, and he was able to dodge the first one. However, it soon became clear that she had expected that, and her second fist hit him square in the mouth. Peter’s teeth clacked down on his cheek, hot blood spilling out into his mouth. He spat it out like the classy boy he was before launching his own attack against the woman.

There was no time for sarcastic quips or lazy defence in this fight. He wasn’t wrangling dizzy drunks on the streets of New York - he was fighting one-on-one with an enhanced, enraged, and highly-trained Winter Soldier. Her punches came hard and fast, and his face was aching from the few she had managed to land on him. There was a cut on his forehead that was dribbling blood into his eye, and a trickle running down his upper lip from his nose, but he’d learnt long ago to tune out the injuries he had in favour of focusing on the task at hand.

In the end, he won, just as he knew he would. This Winter Soldier may have been trained well, but her stiff movements worked against her, just as they had all those months ago when a group of them ambushed him at the Tower.

He had just finished fashioning a web that would adequately restrain her and also allow him to drag her out of the base, when he heard it.

Footsteps.

Not the Avengers, but still familiar. His breath caught in his chest, and Peter turned slowly to see his handler standing at the entrance of the now-destroyed archive room, leaning against the doorframe casually. "Hello again, Asset."

It made Peter's blood boil.

How dare this man, this inhuman monster, have the audacity to look at him, to lean casually against a doorframe with his stupid caterpillar moustache, to *speak* to him. That... that... Peter didn't even have the words to describe how much he hated this man. He didn't even deserve the title of *man*.

"That's not my name," he snarled, readjusting his sweaty grip on the gun he'd taken from the Winter Soldier and pointing it at his handler.

"No, not anymore, I suppose," the man said, not at all disturbed by the weapon aimed directly in between his eyes.

Peter's finger twitched - it would be so easy to pull the trigger. To end it all. To watch this man's brain splatter against the wall as his skull caved in. It would certainly be a better end than he deserved, but something stopped him from pressing down fully.

"You always were an interesting case. Mother and father were loyal HYDRA operatives before we took you from them, but it was for the best. Look at all the good you've done in the world under our guidance," his handler said, and Peter actually growled.

"I didn't do anything *good*. I killed mercilessly, I was a weapon of mass destruction, and you used me to carry out your own, fucked up desires. But I'm stronger than that now."

"Are you really? All I see is weakness. So much weakness. Come back to us, Asset. We can make you great again. We will fix you, and you will rise up even better than before. Come back to HYDRA."

Peter scoffed. "HYDRA's dead, man. HYDRA died the moment you decided to mess with the Avengers. Up there, right now, all your little agents are being rounded up and detained. HYDRA has fallen, and you're falling with it."

"What are you going to do, Asset? Kill me?" his handler asked, tone mocking. "I thought you were *stronger* than that."

"Oh no, I'm going to do far worse than that. I'm going to take you above ground, and then me and my buddies will lock you up on the raft - you've heard of that place right? It's a big, metal prison in the middle of the ocean, and once you're there, you will never, ever, see the light of day again."

His handler's eyes flickered with just the smallest amount of fear, and the satisfaction that surged through Peter was enough to distract him for just a few seconds - but a few seconds was all his handler needed.

The man whipped out a gun, and Peter's senses flared. He jumped to the side, a second too late, and the bullet grazed his side, instantly bringing a hot, stinging pain and the feeling of warm, wet blood against his skin. Man, Tony would be so pissed that he managed to mess up the suit the

first time he wore it.

He hissed, bringing a hand to his side. The graze wasn't too deep - it hadn't reached bone or any of his organs - but it hurt like a *bitch* .

“Alright, bitchboy, that's it. Time to shut your ass up,” Peter growled, taking the gun and smashing his handler over the head with the butt. The man dropped like a lumpy sack of potatoes, his moustache fluttering limply, and Peter smirked to himself.

He'd just clocked his *handler* over the head with a gun. That was like, the ultimate power move.

You've been handled, dumbass .

He webbed his handler up and dragged both him and the Winter Soldier none-too-gently up the half-destroyed stairs of the base. As soon as they reached the top level, Peter *breathed* . That was his first breath as a truly free man... boy-type-person. He'd been unshackled from the last of his sins, and now - now he was free.

A voice that sounded suspiciously like Tony's reached his ears, hysterical and shrieking. “What do you mean he's still down there? I gave you one fucking instruction. *Don't leave him alone* . And what do you do? Leave him alone! Fucking hell, Steve, let go of me. I'm going to get him. I'm going and you can't stop me. Get the fuck off me, there's no way I'm letting this happen for the second time! It's not happening again, you hear me?”

Peter broke into a jog, lest Tony rip Steve's eyeballs out in his attempts to reach him. He rounded the corner and saw a few of the Avengers standing anxiously around Steve, who was wrestling helplessly with Tony, struggling to contain him. Behind them, a massive line of bound, tied, and unconscious HYDRA operatives stretched into the quinjet. Bruce (looking entirely composed and clothed, which meant the Other Guy hadn't been necessary), Sam and Thor were loading them in one by one.

“Tony!” Peter yelled, and the man looked up so fast Peter was surprised he didn't break his neck.

“Peter! Fucking hell, you little shit! Come here right now!”

Peter obeyed, handing his two captives off to Natasha. Tony grabbed him tightly and wrapped his arms around him, squeezing like he wanted to make a Peter flavoured juice. “You miraculous little shit. I hate you so much. You're in so much trouble. Never do that again. Fuck, kid. *Fuck* .”

Peter smiled into Tony's shoulder. “I called my handler a bitchboy.”

Tony let out a wet laugh, and planted a rushed, scraggly kiss on Peter's forehead before running his eyes over Peter's body, checking for any life-threatening injuries. “That's fantastic, kiddo, I'm real proud. That looks like a pretty nasty graze you've got there, let's get Bruce to look at it,” Tony said, eyeing the still-bleeding cut on Peter's side and helping him over to the quinjet.

“He's already treated Bucky for a concussion, Thor for a fractured pinkie which he's complaining about incessantly, by the way, and Wanda for a pretty nasty cut on her leg,” Tony chattered on, clearly flushing his remaining adrenaline out of his system in the only way he knew how, and simultaneously answering Peter's unasked question; ‘was anyone hurt?’

With the help of the rest of the team, they loaded the remaining HYDRA agents into the quinjet holding cell, and Peter thought it was lucky that they'd decided to take the big jet because there were *a lot* of agents.

They took off, and Tony released yet another final, destructive bomb on the base, muttering, “Yippee-ki-yay, motherfuckers,” under his breath.

Peter ignored the Die Hard reference in favour of watching with a sick sense of satisfaction as the last of his demons were blown to smithereens, rubble and dirt swallowed by a billowing mushroom of smoke and flames. Damn, the movies had actually gotten their on-screen explosions right.

He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, and turned to see Tony standing there, looking at him with an odd expression.

“Heh, uh, hey, Tony,” Peter said, kind of scared that the man was about to scream at him for doing something stupid and self-sacrificing yet again.

“Clint just told me your name is *actually* Peter, kiddo, what are the odds?”

Peter sagged. He’d forgotten about the file that Clint was still gripping tightly onto in the cockpit. The file that he still had to go through. The file that detailed how he’d lost every single member of his family, one after the other. The file that would undoubtedly hold the details of every single one of his missions. His sins would be laid bare for all to see, written plainly in black ink. “Yeah, kind of crazy, huh?” Peter said with a weak chuckle.

“I’m... I’m proud of you, kid. You did good,” Tony breathed, and he shifted his weight from foot-to-foot uncomfortably.

Peter smiled softly, and the worries about his file seemed to melt into nothing with Tony’s words. “Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“Love you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it! Please comment because we LOVE hearing from you.

The next chap will take a while to come out, because we're heading into assessment season, but it will show up eventually.

Until next time :D

Little Stark

Chapter Notes

Helloooo everybody, we're back with another chapter. Apologies for the long break, school hit us hard and it took some time to get this one done, but here's the finished result.

And now for a slightly out-of-the-blue bombshell...we've come to the painful conclusion that this will be our last chapter of this fic. Originally, we'd planned for this to be a nice round 25 chapters long, but due to our inability to stick to our own plan, we ended up going down a veryyyy different path and the plot of this fic was totally improvised for a large chunk of the middle section. It wasn't always smooth sailing, it was slightly chaotic at times, but overall we couldn't be happier with the way things turned out. And after writing this chapter, we realised it was the best place to finish this fic. We couldn't justify dragging it out unnecessarily when the ending of this chapter was such a fitting way to wrap it all up.

So, here we are, offering you guys one last time yet another oversized chapter. Please don't kill us for dropping this very sudden news on you, and we hope you enjoy the very last chapter of Itsy Bitsy Spider.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

For the first time in months, Tony *slept*.

And a proper sleep, too. Not just a few stolen hours of decent slumber before he was reluctantly pulled back into the land of the living, and certainly not brief moments dozing on the brink of consciousness at intermittent intervals. No, on this particular occasion, Tony slept like a log. He crashed into bed late afternoon and didn't re-emerge from the comforts of his only slightly-too-old pillows until mid morning the next day. He couldn't remember ever feeling so refreshed and relaxed upon waking up, as though opening his eyelids wasn't a colossal Herculean effort but rather a natural, easy occurrence.

Huh. Maybe the nocturnal life really wasn't all that.

Peter, it appeared, had fallen into an even deeper sleep than Tony's, because the kid didn't wake up until several hours later, around noon. Since all Tony had consumed for breakfast was some far-too-strong coffee, Sam cooked a proper brunch for them all, complete with the works of waffles, pancakes, bacon, eggs and sausages. The Avengers sat around the communal area and ate and talked and joked and laughed, with no small degree of items thrown at each other, but it didn't matter because that was *normal*. Things had never felt more normal, more peaceful, more right. If Tony had known that it would only take a few mainstream missiles dropped over a mountain in New Mexico to make things so wonderfully right, he would have suggested the idea a lot sooner.

It wasn't that they'd been short of happiness before. Peter had been well on the way to a full recovery, he'd discovered his first real, non-freakish superhero friend, and Tony had even told the kid that he wanted to become Peter's dad. Peter's *fucking dad*. That had been one of the single most difficult and rewarding things he'd ever done.

But now? Now the happiness felt validated, purposeful. Now it felt truly *complete*, as though the

one last glaring blockade between Peter and Tony and a life of normality had been triumphantly hurdled .

They'd gone knocking on HYDRA's front door and they had left their message. The place was blown to hell. Every last HYDRA agent at the compound had been arrested and taken into custody, something the press hadn't hesitated to present to the world in a flurry of overly-sensationalised stories, combined with what grainy footage they'd managed to obtain of the smoking remains of the base.

Tony usually had serious objections to press coverage about these kinds of matters, as he knew from experience that they almost always found a way to blow things ridiculously out of proportion. Miraculously, this time wasn't one of them. The news reports held nothing but admiring, if not slightly begrudging, praise for the Avengers, acknowledging that they had held up their conditions of the Accords agreement and simultaneously eliminated a corrupt, dark, twisted agency with a history of trying to destroy the world. All the previous exaggerated doubts and inflated conspiracy theories about the Avengers' dark secrets had apparently been forgotten in the face of their clean success. Tony would have held a grudge, but he was far too relieved for such pettiness.

Because it had been absolutely essential that they regained the favour of the media. Not for psychological reasons - Tony had dealt with a lifetime of bad press, and he was well accustomed to blocking out the opinions of people who were, in his humble opinion, a bunch of money-hungry assholes - but because all the other pieces were in place, and this was the last piece of the puzzle. Gaining the respect and favour of the public would surely be enough to complete what he'd been planning for so long.

It was time to make the adoption official.

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The 'time' in question came exactly three weeks later.

"Are you sure about this, Tony?" Peter asked uncertainly. They were seated in a couple of cushy armchairs in the lobby of Avengers Tower, waiting apprehensively to greet one Ms Kimberly Hopkins, the USKids adoption supervisor who'd been assigned to, essentially, check that Tony wasn't a child abuser.

"Couldn't be more positive, kid," Tony replied. In truth, he felt more than a little nervous himself, but he chalked it up to the novelty of the whole situation. Tony was an expert at interviews that concerned *himself*, and had participated in too many to count over his previous morally-questionable career, but ones that surrounded the adoption of a teenage kid? The literal coronation of Tony Stark into the realm of Dad-hood? Well, that was far more out of his already-oversized comfort zone.

"Really? You sound kinda nervous yourself," Peter noted, watching Tony sceptically. Tony inwardly cursed the kid's irritating ability to be observant. "I thought talking up strangers was meant to be, like, your *thing*?"

"Sadly, I don't think my natural charming finesse is gonna have much effect on this lady," Tony replied. "A polite, well-mannered kind of display would be the better way to go."

"You? Being polite?" Peter repeated, snorting. "Well, in that case we are royally *fucked*."

"Uh-uh." Tony wagged a reprimanding finger at Peter, shaking his head. "None of that language here, bud. Professional language only, unless you really wanna sabotage this whole operation

because you genuinely don't want it to happen, in which case I'm more than happy to-"

"Tony, in the nicest way possible, please shut up," Peter interrupted, rolling his eyes. "You've only asked me about a thousand times whether I still want to do this, and the answer hasn't changed, okay? I - I really want-" He broke off and swallowed, glancing around the lobby nervously before seeming to force himself to lock eyes with Tony again. "Look, I really do want you as my dad, all right?"

Tony felt a rushing surge of pride swell in his chest, burning bright against the overwhelming shadows of nervousness and doubts and second guesses.

"And I want you as my kid, kid," he replied. It was probably the most honest thing he'd ever said.

"Excellent. Two willing participants in the adoption. That will make things run much more smoothly."

Tony's stomach leapt as he glanced up to find a brisk-looking woman standing above them, a small smile on her lips. She had butter-blond hair which was pulled back into a crisp ponytail and piercing blue eyes that matched the hue of her professional suit perfectly. If he'd felt less incapable of speech, Tony would have commended the colour coordination of the whole outfit - matching eye colour to suit colour was a stylistic technique that he fully supported.

Then again, it could just be a crazy coincidence. He supposed not everyone had time to have their suits tailor-made.

"I'm sorry, forgive my abruptness," the lady went on, breaking into a proper smile this time. "I do try to lighten the atmosphere in these kinds of meetings."

"No need to apologise," Tony reassured her, standing up and greeting her with a warm smile of his own. "We are fully in support of atmosphere-lightening tactics here. Humour discrimination is not condoned." He could feel Peter rolling his eyes behind his back, probably at the terrible, terrible attempt at a joke of his own.

"Indeed," the woman smiled, before offering her hand to shake. "Kimberley Hopkins. I've been assigned to run some background checks before this adoption can be fully given the all-clear."

"Tony Stark," Tony grinned in response, returning the handshake.

"I'd worked that much out for myself," the woman smiled. "It's a pleasure meeting you. Would you mind showing me Peter's records?"

"Of course," Tony said, and the three of them entered the elevator, standing in awkward silence while the doors slid shut and the machine shuddered smoothly to life.

He had to hand it to this woman; she certainly had developed an immunity to meeting famous figures. He couldn't remember ever meeting someone so...well...neutral, he guessed. Especially when it came to first interactions. People either went speechless with blind adoration at the sight of him, or sent him glares that could probably also effectively function as daggers, often accompanied by no small amount of verbal abuse. He much preferred the former, but he'd learned to expertly ignore the latter a long time ago. This professional formality, though, was entirely new ground, and it felt almost...daunting. How on Earth was he meant to convince this woman he was a capable father figure (something he wasn't even sure of himself) when she was entirely immune to every trick in his book?

*Maybe Pepper wasn't so off about that attention-seeking complex.*

The elevator doors slid open, and Tony stepped out into the communal area, where Peter's records were waiting in a neat file on the table. He'd made a point to forewarn the rest of the team about the meeting with the social services worker, so they knew to keep clear of the communal area while the interview was taking place. They'd even made a collective effort to clean up the place, vacuuming up every last loose piece of popcorn and scrubbing the coffee stains off the couches. Tony didn't think he'd ever seen the living area look so presentable.

He led Peter and Ms Hopkins over to the table and invited her to sit on the armchair opposite the couch, upon which he and Peter sat.

"Well then, let's get started," Ms Hopkins said. "Could I have a look through Peter's records, please?"

Tony nodded somewhat nervously and passed over the file to Ms Hopkins. She flipped through it silently for a few minutes, running a critical eye over all of its contents and thoroughly scanning each page. Tony could feel Peter shifting restlessly next to him, probably out of nerves, and laid what he hoped was a relaxing hand on the kid's knee, although judging by the erratic pounding of his own heart, Tony himself was in no state to be calming down others.

*I guess you and the kid can just freak out together, then.*

After an uncomfortable amount of silence had passed, and Tony was quite sure that the adoption was going to be rejected entirely, the woman finally lifted her gaze and addressed them.

"This is quite a dark history," she said calmly, a note of sympathy in her voice. "No living relatives, if I'm interpreting this correctly?"

"Not that we know of," Tony replied, his mouth feeling very dry.

"That makes matters simpler in terms of the legal process," Ms Hopkins explained. "You won't have to obtain the consent of any legal guardians, as there are none currently in existence. I'd say that if everything goes according to plan, you'll be granted legal approval within a month at most."

Tony nodded, feeling slightly less overwhelmed at the tolerable time frame. "That would be ideal."

Ms Hopkins regarded him mildly for a moment, before setting down the file. "Right. Well, I'd like to speak to each of you individually, if you don't mind. It's customary practice, for obvious ethical reasons. Mr Parker, if you would come first?"

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Tony waited outside of the communal area for about half an hour, restlessly pacing in his workshop and imagining all the kinds of questions that Ms Hopkins would be asking Peter. Probably the standard shit about whether he felt safe, whether he was being coerced or manipulated - the kind of questions that you couldn't get away with not asking, purely because all bases needed to be covered. He was worried, too, that his reputation would make the process even more complicated; Tony was all too aware of the scepticism that surrounded his ability to take care of a teenage kid, and whilst that had died down somewhat since they'd taken down the HYDRA base, he'd be lying to himself if he pretended like it had disappeared completely.

And speaking of HYDRA, he didn't see how Ms Hopkins would get to the end of the interview without bringing the bastards up. No matter how many times he tried to reassure himself that Peter could handle himself, that he'd talked about HYDRA before and he'd recovered well enough that he could do it again, it still freaked the shit out of Tony. What if the woman's questioning got too

personal? What if Peter couldn't deal with the weight of being reminded of his traumatic past?

So he paced in his workshop, back and forth, over and over again, while he freaked the fuck out.

Finally, after far too long, Peter was released from the communal area. There was no time to talk to the kid, not with Ms Hopkins right behind him, so Tony had to settle for the briefest of exchanged glances. A small flood of relief washed over him when he saw that Peter looked normal. Fine, actually. He looked almost happy.

And then it was Tony's turn.

In the end, Tony was glad that Peter wasn't in the room with them. Ms Hopkins drilled him with no small number of sensitive questions, covering everything from Peter's birth date to the horrifying details of his past at HYDRA, and there was not an inch of specificity to be spared during the conversation. Tony spoke to her in detail about what he knew of Peter's upbringing, and the way it had affected him when he first found him - the nightmares, the panic attacks, the general lack of trust for anyone that wasn't himself, a reflex ingrained into him from a very early age. He felt slightly guilty about the personal nature of some of the things he revealed, but felt it was, unfortunately, necessary. This Kimberley Hopkins had an incredibly well-honed bullshit detector, and he knew that attempting to edit the story would only make her suspect Tony of being not entirely transparent, which would subsequently lead to her deeming him to be an untrustworthy guardian for Peter. He even briefly went over the events of Peter's stay at the Tower so far, including the incredibly painful topic of his recapture by HYDRA, which had been particularly difficult to articulate. But he'd done it, and whilst it hadn't been the most flawless or accurate recount of events, he thought he'd at least done justice to Peter's recovery and his relatively happy settlement into the Tower - without, of course, neglecting the trauma the kid had suffered along the way.

But covering Peter's past hadn't been enough for Ms Hopkins. She'd then proceeded to grill him about an entirely new topic - the kid's future, or more specifically, his future relating to Tony. Question after question was hurled at him: would he be able to make time for Peter amongst all his other business arrangements? Did he have a plan to balance running Stark Industries and fathering a teenager? (Tony conveniently forgot to mention, here, that it was Pepper who did most of the admin work for SI; that certainly wouldn't have painted him in a responsible light.) What was his strategy for protecting Peter against the threat that came with being the son of a nationally renowned enhanced figure? Would he be able to cope with the stress? Would he keep the kid as protected from the press as possible? Did he know how to handle the situation if Peter's anxiety flared again? What strategies did he have in place to help the kid's mental recovery?

On and on and on it went, until what had started as a light-hearted, albeit nerve wracking, interview had morphed entirely into a gruelling, exhausting interrogation session. Tony was sure that as time dragged on, his answers became less and less comprehensive, largely due to this woman's uncanny ability to ruffle even the most unflappable of feathers. He'd seen hints of her immunity to being manipulated earlier, of course, but by the end of the interview Tony could appreciate that this woman was straight up subhuman. She seemed to see through every feeble try he made at lightening the mood of the conversation, or even his less dignified attempts to sweet-talk her into approval. Once the draining session was finally over, Tony was sure he'd royally screwed up.

Time to kiss those dreams of Dad-hood goodbye, Stark. I guess your ego really was your downfall this time.

He barely noticed when Ms Hopkins stood to bring Peter back into the room, and when he finally registered that the kid was now sitting next to him on the sofa, Tony felt nothing but a fresh wave

of disappointment. She'd want to break the bad news with the kid there, too. Maybe she thought they could offer each other some twisted form of moral support - a last moment of emotional connection between them, before they were tragically wrenched apart by law forever.

He was just considering whether the adoption could be transferred to Pepper somehow when Ms Hopkin's voice startled the troubled thoughts away.

"Mr Stark," she said clearly. Tony looked up, his heart racing, bracing for the worst.

"I think you two have both had long and difficult lives," Ms Hopkins began. "I think Peter, especially, has been subjected to, quite frankly, an utterly horrific upbringing. Officially, he should probably be in a social care unit somewhere."

No. *No*. There was no way Tony was letting this happen. He could handle the adoption being rejected, but he could *not* handle the kid being torn away from him to go live in some asylum.

"No," he blurted immediately. "If you think I'm going to just let him-"

"He *should* be in a social unit," Ms Hopkins interrupted loudly. "But I feel that to relocate Peter there at this point would be counter-productive to the commendable recovery he's made from his life at HYDRA so far."

Tony started at her uncomprehendingly. His heart seemed to be pounding somewhere in his mouth. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying, Mr Stark," Ms Hopkins said deliberately, "that I think you are the best person for Peter right now. You were the first person to offer him a bond of trust, and comfort, and love - something that he'd never experienced until he'd met you, or at least not that he would remember. You no doubt have your flaws, which have been displayed rather publicly in the past, if I may add, but I don't think there's such a thing as a flawless family. And as unconventional of a choice as it may seem to the general public, I believe you are the right person to be a father to Peter. You two have evidently forged a strong bond of trust and care, and I think it will go a long way. I'll be writing my report of approval, and you should receive the official documentation detailing the official acceptance of your adoption within a month."

And with that, Ms Hopkins stood, gave them one last final smile, and left the room, striding swiftly into the elevator and out of sight.

For a moment, there was nothing but incredulous silence.

Tony couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

He couldn't believe it.

She had given her approval.

She had *accepted the adoption*.

He didn't know whether he wanted to laugh or cry or grab the kid into a hug and never let go, but it didn't matter, because the shock had apparently rendered him incapable of basic movement. It took all of his effort to turn to the kid sitting beside him.

There were a lot of things he probably should have said. But all he could think to ask was, "Well, kid, what the fuck did you say to her?"

Peter blinked up at him.

“I had the persuasiveness of a speech impaired toddler, the consistency in tone of an untuned piano and the eloquence of that giant Grawp fellow from *Harry Potter*. So what did you do, kid? What magic did you work? Got any more secret talents I don’t know about?”

Peter stared up at him, looking as innocent as ever. Tony didn’t know how in the hell the kid’s eyes still looked so innocent, after everything they’d witnessed and experienced.

“I just told her that I loved you.”

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Peter had forgotten, up until now, that Tony was a billionaire - an awesome, suave billionaire with a reputation that preceded him and a bank account larger than his sizable guilt complex.

But to Peter, he was, and always had been, just... Tony. The man was more than the shallow character that the media painted him as. Behind his designer suits and his sunglasses that probably cost more than the average New Yorker’s weekly rent, there was a man who cared more deeply about those he loved than anyone he’d ever met.

Granted, Peter had grown up in a HYDRA base, and cultivating a loving relationship between employees and assets hadn’t really been at the top of their to-do list, but he still knew what the emotion *looked* like. And he saw it every time he locked eyes with Tony. The man was his... dad, officially, now too. It was no longer a title that remained unseen and unheard in the recesses of their minds. Legally, he was Peter Stark. Tony Stark’s son.

But still, Peter couldn’t see him as anything other than the dweeb who had nerded out about Star Wars with him for eleven hours straight and then drifted to sleep with popcorn in his goatee and a DIY lightsaber made of toilet rolls loosely clutched in his grip.

That was why he was so surprised to hear that Tony had not only managed to find Peter a school that would allow him to enroll despite his dubious records, but had also wrangled an incredibly imminent start date for him.

Imminent in the sense that it was tomorrow.

He was starting high school *tomorrow* .

The perks of having a billionaire as a kind-of-dad, he guessed.

To deal with the upcoming, anxiety-inducing experience, he’d binge-watched all the highschool related movies he could find with Tony as a sort of weird preparation ritual, and then freaked out via messages with Ned until eleven o’clock at night, when the other boy had finally gone to bed, claiming he needed his beauty sleep.

But Peter couldn’t sleep, because he was *going to school tomorrow* . For the first time in his life, he’d be as normal as one could get. He wouldn’t be Asset, the lethal HYDRA assassin, or Peter no-last-name, the weird, homeless kid that Tony Stark had found on the streets and then decided to keep out of the kindness in his heart, and maybe just a smidge of curiosity.

No, he'd just be Peter Parker, the schoolboy extraordinaire.

He would just have to get used to the surname he'd been assigned. Tony and Pepper had enrolled him under his biological parents' last name, and therefore, *technically* his own too, but thinking of himself as a *Parker* felt strange to him - a strange weight on his shoulders that he didn't really need to carry.

But Tony and Pepper had a good reason for their decision. Peter hated to imagine the intense scrutiny that would come with showing up halfway through the year with the last name 'Stark' trailing behind him. If that was the case, he'd never get a taste of normal school life.

Hence, he was now Peter Parker, during school hours at least.

And his last name identity crisis wasn't the only freak-out that school had brought upon him. He was terrified that he wouldn't be up to the same standard as his soon-to-be peers, because every single one of them had probably been properly educated since they were five years old.

Sure, Peter may have been taught the entire high school curriculum by the time he was ten, and yes, his almost-photographic memory ensured he hadn't forgotten very much of it, if any at all, but he was still *freaking out*.

He'd even conned Vision into bringing him up to speed on anything he might have missed in his not-so-traditional education, and Steve and Bucky had told him thrilling stories about their adventures in the war (though that had been more of a hindrance than a help. It was so easy to get distracted when literally *anything* else was infinitely more interesting than the proper names of all fifty states of America. He knew where they were, was that not enough?), but the thought of being years behind in his education still scared Peter to no end.

Both Ned and Tony repeatedly reassured him that he was smart, that he'd be fine, but what they both seemed to forget was that everyone else at Midtown was *also* smart - they had to be just to get in. There was a *reason* Peter had needed to take an entrance exam. And, sure, he'd aced it, but there was a big difference between one little test and an entire curriculum of classes.

So, to curb (or maybe provoke) his anxiety, he'd questioned Ned endlessly about everything to do with Midtown.

They had a robotics club, and an academic decathlon team, and a bunch of other things that Peter was vaguely interested in. Ned had made him promise to join the AcaDec team (see, he was already "all up in the lingo," as Tony put it), because apparently, "I need someone to liven up the party. Flash is just a pain, MJ's alright, but she's not exactly the talkative kind, and everyone else is great, but like, they aren't *you* ." And damn. How could he say no to that?

He'd already memorised his locker code and schedule, both of which Pepper had very kindly retrieved for him a few days ago, which would save him from having to pay a visit to the office before the school day started. He and Ned had been delighted to discover that they had all of the same classes, and that their lockers were right next to each other, although Peter suspected that Tony might have had something to do with both of those things.

Again, the perks of having a billionaire for a kind-of-dad.

He had a pretty good idea of the school's layout as well (he may or not have forced Ned to send him a picture of one of the old fold-out maps that they kept in the office), and so he finally fell asleep feeling relatively well prepared.

He should have known that his feeling of serenity wouldn't last very long. After all, life had a nasty habit of throwing him into the deep end and watching while he struggled to stay afloat.

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Peter discovered the first thing he disliked about school at exactly six am the next morning, when his alarm blared loudly and roused him from a freakishly morose dream. It was not one that he wanted to remember.

He groaned, turning over and clumsily patting his bedside table until he found the cursed noise machine. If someone ever figured out time travel, he would use it to kill whoever invented the alarm clock. There was actually quite a high probability that he'd get to fulfill that dream, knowing the genius that was sleeping just down the hall from him.

With the stupid beeping finally silenced, Peter found it very hard to resist the pull of his unusually heavy eyelids, which were threatening to drag him back into the world of disturbing dreams. He'd gotten four whole hours of sleep last night, so why was he so tired?

He cracked one eyeball open and squinted against the weak dawn light streaming through his open blinds. The sun was barely awake, so why did he have to be?

School was cruel. School was a mean, mean institution and Peter would swear his wholehearted allegiance to anyone trying to rebel against the iron fist with which they were holding their poor, sleep-deprived students.

Suddenly, the peaceful, if not exhausted, silence of the early morning was disrupted by an enthusiastic knock on his door. Peter responded with a small grunt that was half muffled by his pillow, letting the knocker know that it was okay for them to come in.

The door was pushed open, and in between his slow blinks, Peter caught a glimpse of polished shoes. Tony had come to pay him a visit at this ungodly hour of the morning, then.

His suspicions were confirmed seconds later when the man's too-cheery voice rang through the air. "Wakey wakey - eggs and bakey!"

"Ugh, you just had to choose the most obnoxious way to burst in here, didn't you? It's too early for your shit," Peter grumbled, pulling the comforter over his head.

"Well, I guess someone's not a morning person," Tony muttered, ignoring Peter when he interrupted him to mutter, "evidently," under his breath like the little shit he was. "Also, I'm being serious. Sam's making eggs and bacon for your special first day of school send-off."

At that, Peter perked up. Nothing could beat Sam's cooking, and it might just take the edge off his unfortunate early-morning wake up.

Now that he was in a less of a vegetative state, the sickening mix of anxiety and excitement from last night was starting to creep back in, except this time there was a lot less excitement and a *lot* more anxiety. Seven thirty was ticking closer and closer with each passing breath he took, and Peter struggled to reason with himself.

He'd be fine right? He was totally accustomed to society now. Panic attacks and other assorted freak-outs were almost completely erased from his life. Sam and Tony wouldn't let him go to school if they didn't think he could do it. Yeah, he'd be fine. Absolutely A-OK.

Peter pulled on a pair of semi-worn jeans and his favourite science pun T-shirt. It said 'viva la $R=V/I$ ' and Peter loved it, but Bruce and Tony were the only ones - apart from himself, naturally - who got the joke. He was going to a STEM school, though. People there would get it, right? They

had to get it.

He typed out a one-handed text to Ned, who had left him a string of messages a few minutes ago. Apparently, the other boy would be arriving exactly thirty minutes before the bell rang, a whole fifteen minutes before he normally did, just so he could give Peter the ‘grand tour’ of the campus.

Not for the first time, Peter thanked his lucky stars for his best friend, who had unceremoniously plopped himself into Peter’s life a few weeks ago. It had been the start of a glorious friendship, involving a more-than-healthy amount of *Star Wars* marathons.

Starting a new school was going to suck (something he had learnt from the movies, and also a fact that Tony said he could confirm with one-hundred percent certainty) but the whole thing would have been infinitely worse without Ned, and Peter was already scared shitless, so he couldn’t imagine what the experience would have been like otherwise.

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Sam’s bacon and eggs might have been delicious, but Peter wouldn’t know. He had no memory of consuming them, and if someone asked him what the Avengers had talked about over breakfast, he could confidently say he had no fucking clue. There may have been several hugs goodbye from the team as a whole while Tony led him into the elevator and down to the parking lot, but it could have also been a figment of his overactive imagination.

The drive to school was similarly absent from his memory, though he had a vague recollection of Tony spilling something green in the backseat, where he was sitting with Peter, while Happy yelled at him for dirtying the car.

Soon enough though, his mind was re-tethered to his body, because Tony was poking him incessantly. Peter’s focus shifted from the bothersome man to the tinted windows of the car, or more importantly, what was beyond them.

Midtown School of Science and Technology stood before him, its buildings looking stately with their layered red brick and white trimmings. Peter could see various students milling around in the courtyard, and Ned was perched on a stone wall, his eyes fixed expectantly on their car.

“Pete, you gotta respond, bud. We’re here. Hello, hello? Do you want to go back home? What’s happening? Talk to me, kiddo, gimme something to work with.”

“No,” Peter mustered, not missing the way Tony blew out a sigh of relief when he finally spoke. “No, I want to stay, it’s just... a lot of stuff, I guess.”

“Yeah, kiddie, I get it. But you’ve got Ned with you in all of your classes, and if you need me at any time, you can just call me, alright? We can ditch this place and go get ice cream or something.”

Peter smiled weakly. “That’s not sending a very good message to me, an impressionable adolescent. And don’t you have a bunch of meetings today? Pepper would kill you for skipping them. *Again* .”

“What? I’d rather eat ice cream with my kid than listen to a gaggle of old men babble on and on about the gig economy and how it’s affecting the company’s employment landscape. So sue me.”

Peter laughed, ignoring the way his heart leapt happily at Tony’s casual use of, “my kid.” He felt his coiled muscles loosen slightly. Tony always had that effect on him - like a human muscle relaxant.

“Alright, have you got your books? You have gym today, right? Did you remember to pack your gym clothes? Don’t go too hard in gym, by the way. Normal teenagers can’t bench ten tons,” the man fired off, starting to sound like a real helicopter parent. Peter would have rolled his eyes if he wasn’t too busy trying to hold off a surge of overwhelming anxiety.

“But, it wouldn’t be that bad if you showed off, ya know, just a little,” Tony continued with a wink, causing Peter to chuckle. “Right, do you remember your cover story?”

“Yep, if anyone sees me with you, or if they notice Happy, then I’m your personal intern,” Peter recited, the words nothing more than muscle memory at this point, thanks to the amount of times he’d been forced to say it, just to “double-check he knew it.” Peter hadn’t known until now that double-checking included far more than two checks.

“Fantastic. Have a good day, buddy. Remember to call if you need *anything* at all, and, uh, I guess this is where I take my leave?”

Peter shrugged. He knew even less about this school thing than Tony did. Nevertheless, he straightened his shoulders and tightened his hand around his backpack strap. A deep breath filled his lungs, in and out, and he reached for the car door handle, but he couldn’t open it. Not without saying a proper goodbye.

Peter twisted around and tackled Tony in a tight hug, relaxing into the man’s chest. Tony let out a startled laugh and brought one of his hands to rest on Peter’s back, while the other carded through his hair.

“*Thank you*, Tony, for everything. Love you.”

“Love you too, kiddo, now go get ‘em! Don’t let your old man hold you back.”

“Never,” Peter said, smiling as he finally pulled the car door open and slipped out. “Bye, Tony, enjoy your meetings.”

“You know I won’t, you little twerp,” the older man called, and it was the last thing Peter heard before the car door slammed shut and ‘leadfoot Happy’ zoomed off like the speed demon he was, leaving Peter standing alone and bereft on the curb.

But not for long, because Ned pranced up behind him not seconds later.

“Dude, this is so cool! You’re here! I’m here! We’re both here! At school! This is crazy!” he shrieked, causing a few of the passing teenagers to shoot them weird looks.

“Yeah, man, it’s insane! But like, what do we do now?”

“Oh my god, I forgot you’ve never been to school before. Okay, okay, no biggie, I’m just gonna be like the Obi Wan Kenobi to your Luke. I just hope I don’t die before the quest is over.”

“I don’t know, Ned. I think I already died when I woke up at six am. Why does school start so early in the morning? It’s basically a violation of our human rights.”

“That’s a tad bit dramatic, don’t you think?” A voice came from behind them, and Peter spun around to see a tall, Asian man dressed in a suit. It was probably fancy by normal people standards, but Peter was used to Tony Stark’s wardrobe, and he couldn’t help but notice how the pants were just a little too long, the cuffs trailing on the ground at the back.

The stranger didn’t disturb his spidey sense, but he struggled not to jump at the sudden presence.

“I’m Principal Morita, and I assume you’re Mr Parker. I’m glad to see you’re enjoying your first day so far.” The man chuckled, and Peter instantly died inside. His *principal* had just caught him bad-mouthing the American education system, and his first day hadn’t even technically *started* yet. This was just fantastic.

“Ye-” he began, but his voice cracked miserably. Peter heard Ned snort in amusement behind him, so he cleared his throat and tried again while his cheeks burned with the fiery intensity of a urinary tract infection. “Yes, yes I am. That’s me. Yep. Was I, uh, supposed to go somewhere? I thought my... guardian, did all the forms and stuff already?”

Principal Morita smiled again, and Peter started to relax. That wasn’t the smile of a man who wished ill upon anyone. “No, you’re all good. I just like to make a point of personally introducing myself to any and all new students. Welcome to Midtown, Mr Parker. I hope you enjoy your time here.”

“Thanks, sir. I’m sure I will,” Peter replied, before breathing out a sigh of relief. Had he just successfully gotten through a social interaction?

Principal Morita nodded his head before strolling off towards a group of kids who were huddled around something that looked suspiciously like a sentient slime monster, and Peter turned around to face Ned. “He seems nice.”

“Mr Morita? Oh yeah, he’s pretty cool. But not as cool as the labs, which is gonna be the first stop on our grand tour! C’mon, Pete, we don’t have all day!”

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Ned’s ‘grand tour’ led them all the way around the campus, and Peter was feeling significantly more confident in his ability to make his way through the halls of the school without looking like a “lost puppy” - Ned’s words, not his.

They ended up at their lockers, and it only took Peter three tries to open his, which he thought was an incredible feat, given that he’d never done it before. He didn’t understand why the things were so long and skinny - surely it wasn’t the most practical shape they could have chosen.

Nevertheless, he shoved the books he didn’t need for the next two periods inside and slammed the door shut, perhaps a little too vigorously, if the weird looks he got (for the second time *that morning*) were any indication.

As he turned around, he saw a girl with wild brown hair and a generally unimpressed air about her walking up to them. She stopped in front of Ned, and, maintaining her expressionless mask, said, “Hey, loser.”

Peter would have bristled at the not-so-nice name directed at his friend, but for some reason he could tell that this mystery girl didn’t mean anything by it, except maybe a begrudging feeling of amiability. Was this the MJ girl that Ned had told him so much about?

Her dark eyes trailed over his best friend’s shoulder and met his own, and her expression morphed into one of mild intrigue. “Hey, other loser.”

“Uh, hi? I’m Peter,” he said, trying to remain friendly despite the fact that this girl had been anything but in the few seconds he’d known her. Though if this *was* MJ, that was just how she was, according to Ned.

“Michelle. MJ to my friends, of which you are not.”

Well, that was blunt, but at least he knew who she was now. Besides, he could get behind blunt. Being blunt was better than being a lying, scheming, evil organisation that stole children and ruined any chance they could possibly have of living a normal life.

Huh, so maybe he still had a few unresolved issues with HYDRA.

“Don’t worry about that, it’s nothing personal. She’ll warm up to you eventually,” Ned assured him as the bell rang, and Peter allowed himself to be towed through the crushing swarms of students and into his first class.

By the end of the day, he would be upgraded from ‘Michelle’ to ‘MJ’. That was his goal for the day. Screw doing well in his classes and making a good first impression. He was going to grow on Michelle like a colony of E. coli on room temperature Canadian beef.

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Peter was actually quite proud of himself. He’d managed to get all the way through to lunch with only a few, small mishaps.

The only truly terrible event of the day had occurred when his history teacher - who was the human incarnation of evil, in his opinion at least - had made him stand up in front of the entire class and introduce himself. That had been hell, and Ned had laughed at him throughout the entire period for his excellent impression of a tomato while he’d clumsily stuttered out his name.

His hatred of his history teacher, AKA Mr Dell, AKA the worst person on Earth, was only heightened by the man’s laugh. It was deep and throaty, like the sound a dog made before throwing up, and the man laughed so often that Peter was plagued by the sound of dog barf for the entire period.

Like he said, *evil* .

He’d been worried about being behind in the classes, but the stuff that the Avengers (mostly Vision) had taught him ended up paying off. And, as much as he hated to admit it, the education he’d gotten from HYDRA when he was younger had helped just a little as well.

If he really wanted to, Peter could probably be off at college by now, but a fifteen-year-old in college wasn’t anywhere close to the normal social experience of an average American teen, and at the moment, all he wanted was normality.

*Michelle* (not MJ, as he’d been firmly reminded when he slipped up once) was also in all of his and Ned’s classes, except their electives (the girl had chosen journalism and commerce while they were in engineering and mechanics), and Ned had been right about two things. One; that he’d like her - she was direct and cynical and smart and secretly really funny and Peter was *freaking out* because he’d never actually spoken properly to a girl before, but it was fine. Everything was fine. Ned told him he was socialising well, and he trusted the other boy’s judgement.

The second thing that Ned had been right about was that she’d warm up to him. Michelle had actually offered him a half smile halfway through English, when they’d made eye contact after he’d answered a question about *Animal Farm* - the novel that his class was required to read as part of the syllabus. It was all right, nothing special, but apparently his excitable teacher didn’t share this view, describing the book as “rife with symbolism and critical satire”.

Even though he had one and a half friends, there were also a few... unfortunate additions to his class. Like one Eugene ‘Flash’ Thompson, jerk extraordinaire, who established himself as a pain in Peter’s ass less than five minutes into their science lesson. And he was a *stupid* pain in Peter’s ass at that.

Mrs Warren, their teacher, had asked, “So, what do we need to do in order to calculate linear acceleration between points A and B?”



Flash, who apparently got his name from answering questions quickly (though rarely correctly, Peter soon found out), spouted out, “The product of sine of angle and gravity divided by the mass.”

It had been very, very wrong. A bullshit answer for a bullshit person.

He wasn’t sure why, but Peter felt very aggressively towards Flash. Maybe he exuded some weird pheromone that made people automatically disposed to disliking him?

It seemed to have affected Mrs Warren too, because she’d sounded incredibly frustrated when she told Flash, “Being the fastest isn’t always the best if you’re wrong.”

Peter had actually started to like her, but then she’d decided to pick on him for the solution to the problem on the board, and his opinion of her had shot downwards. He knew the answer though, so he wasn’t going to begrudge her for it too much. “Mass cancels out, so it’s just gravity times sine,” he’d said automatically, sure it was correct, but still nervous that somehow, some way, it’d be wrong. Was that his self-diagnosed social anxiety coming into play?

But it hadn’t been wrong, and Mrs Warren nodded approvingly as she wrote it on the board with a squeaky whiteboard marker. Flash had whirled around, giving him a pathetic glare. Honestly, Peter was an ex-HYDRA assassin, and staring down a pimply, hormonal teenager was nothing when compared to some of the properly murderous glares he’d been on the receiving end of.

However, it turned out that the whole experience had been enough for him to get marked down on Flash’s bad side. He hadn’t really wanted to make any enemies on his first day of school, but his life rarely went the way he wanted it to go, as proven by the disastrous lunch to end all disastrous lunches.

It had started off well, as all disastrous things did. Peter and Ned had spent the first ten minutes fanboying over rumours of a possible new Star Wars movie in the making and devouring the less-than gourmet burgers that the school cafeteria served (and in them, Peter found the second thing he didn’t like about school. He’d spent the majority of his life eating crappy meals just like this at HYDRA, but now he’d grown accustomed to Sam’s spectacular cooking, so going back to these bland, oddly chewy burgers was not something he enjoyed) while Michelle ignored everyone and everything as she read her book, though judging by her occasional eye roll when he and Ned got a little *too* excited, she wasn’t quite as oblivious to the world around her as she was pretending to be.

But then his spider sense blared a warning, not a strong one, but enough to make him move to the side slightly, and as a result, he managed to dodge the crumpled napkin that had been aimed at his head.

The perpetrator? One Eugene Thompson. Ugh, just what he needed.

Nevertheless, he turned around and fixed the other boy with a stare. “Uh, can I help you?”

“What’s your problem, Parker?” Flash asked, and Peter was rather suddenly reminded of the Geronimo Stilton book that had been his one and only source of entertainment during the long nights spent in his cell at HYDRA, back when he was a young boy, filled to the brim with naivety and a small splash of indoctrination.

He still didn’t know if his teacher had technically been allowed to give it to him, but it had happened nonetheless. The book had been the first place he’d seen the word ‘obnoxious’, but little Peter hadn’t known what it had meant. When he’d asked his handler, he’d earned himself a slap across the face (not knowing things at HYDRA was frowned upon), but he’d gotten an answer anyway.

*“Annoying or objectionable due to being a showoff or attracting undue attention to oneself.”*

If you asked Peter, Flash was Obnoxious with a capital ‘O’.

Now, Peter considered himself a generally patient person, but this kid was really testing his limits. “You’re the one that tried to throw a napkin at me, so I guess I could ask you the same thing.”

“I’m not the know-it-all that showed up out of nowhere in the middle of the year,” Flash spat, and suddenly it all made sense to Peter. He’d seen shit like this in movies, but he’d thought that humanity was at least a little more evolved than the lesser constructs of Hollywood.

This entire insignificant spat was built on the foundations of the petty kid in front of him. Flash was just mad that Peter had answered a question correctly in their science class, and the ridiculousness of the situation genuinely made him worried for society’s future as a whole.

“All I did was answer a question right, that’s not a crime,” Peter replied, somehow managing to keep his tone passive. Who’d have thought that a lot of the skills HYDRA had instilled upon him would come in handy in high school, of all places? He didn’t appreciate the constant reminders of his past, though he supposed they were an unavoidable hindrance.

“You’re new here, so I’ll let it go this time. It’s not your fault that Fatty over there didn’t explain the hierarchy we have here. Heads up: you, pal, are at the very bottom,” Flash said, his tone painfully condescending.

And that was it. The bully could insult Peter all he liked, but there was no way he would let that dig at Ned fly by without retaliating. His family was very against bullying, and, unfortunately for Flash, they’d instilled those same values on him.

He stood up, squaring his shoulders and trying to stretch himself to his full height, which wasn’t actually very tall at all. He was a short person, but so was Tony, and that man could inject fear into even the most courageous warrior’s heart.

Flash stared back at him, looking so full of himself that Peter struggled to restrain himself while his hands twitched impatiently from his waist, where he’d clenched them into fists.

Tony had told him that starting a riot on his very first day would lead to a bad reputation and possibly even expulsion. Despite the fact that Flash existed, he really liked Midtown, and Peter didn’t want his time here to end before it was supposed to.

So, he satisfied himself with images of his knuckles meeting the side of the bully’s cheek in a harsh union, and instead let just a little bit of the confidence that he normally reserved for Spider-Man slip into his expression, revelling when Flash took a small step back.

Peter Parker may be a meek, little, timid new highschooler, but Spider-Man was a fighter. Brave and heroic, good to the very core. Nothing like his past self, who’d been cowardly in the worst way.

Only cowards went after people who were weaker than them.

Only cowards attacked others to feel better about themselves.

Flash was a coward, and Peter couldn’t stand cowards.

“Back off, man, before you say something else you’ll regret,” Peter said.

The bully scoffed, but Peter could see that he was rattled. Had no one ever stood up to him before? In a school filled with child prodigies and budding geniuses, no one had ever once had the gall to tell this singular, measly bully to back down?

That was fine. Peter could do it for them. “You’re going to apologise to Ned, and then you’re going to leave us alone. Sound good?”

“Uh, yeah, as if that’s happening,” Flash snorted. “I don’t think you’ve heard, but my father practically owns this school.”

“And mine could buy it off him in a second. Now back. The fuck. Off.”

Flash stared at Peter for a long time. A freakishly long time. Just as it was starting to get kind of awkward, the other boy broke eye contact and glanced first at Ned, who was watching the exchange with a gaping mouth, and then at his shoes.

“Sorry, Leeds,” he mumbled, before shuffling off.

Peter plopped back down onto the lunch table, sighing tiredly, and Ned leaned over with a grin on his face. “Dude! That was awesome. That was so cool. Oh my god. Thanks, by the way. You didn’t have to do that.”

Peter shot him a smile and punched his arm gently. “‘Course I did. I’m not gonna let some trash bag loser call my best friend names,” Peter said, and Ned’s smile grew impossibly wider.

He glanced towards Michelle, and smiled timidly at her. If he was being honest, the girl scared him, just a little, but he wasn’t sure if that was due to his inexperience with girls in general, or the unfriendly exterior she wrapped around herself like it was a tortilla and she was burrito filling. “Hi, Michelle.”

The girl nodded appreciatively at him, her eyes twinkling like the moustache of a man with a cold, and he got the sense that she approved of his response to Flash’s pestering. That feeling was only increased with her next words.

“It’s MJ.”

It was only three syllables, two measly words, but joy filled Peter’s heart at the sound of them.

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So maybe the disastrous lunch to end all disastrous lunches hadn’t actually been that bad. Maybe Peter was just being a little dramatic. Okay, he was definitely being very dramatic. Tony was always saying that he was the human equivalent of a Victorian melodrama.

But his day had only gotten worse from there.

Because gym was the last period he had that day, and (*of course*) their teacher, Mr Wilson, had decided that he couldn’t be bothered to do anything more than dodgeball.

Dodgeball , of all things.

It was so cliché, it *hurt* . In all the movies he’d watched, all they ever played was dodgeball (or Quidditch, but he didn’t think that was ever going to happen, no matter how fun it sounded. If everyone in his class put their brains together, they’d probably be able to figure out how to make brooms fly, but there was no way that the school would let them zoom around, virtually unprotected, hundreds of feet in the air), but he’d hoped that it was just one of the many things

Hollywood had gotten wrong about high school.

Apparently, it was actually one of the few things they'd gotten *right*.

And that was how Peter found himself in one of the most intimidating situations he'd ever been in. AKA, the boy's change rooms.

He'd faced an evil organisation, endured brutal torture and systematic brainwashing, *literally killed people*, but stripping virtually naked in front of all the guys in his class was the thing that almost broke him.

His only saving grace was that everyone else was just as visually uncomfortable as he was, and they all kept their eyes on the ground while struggling into the dark blue shirts and yellow shorts that made up Midtown's sport uniform.

Peter left the cursed place with burning cheeks and the lingering scent of at least five different distasteful deodorants in his nostrils.

However, as soon as the dodgeball game started, he realised he would trade a thousand years in the change rooms just for the chance to stop playing.

The squeaks of rubber sneakers on the shiny wooden floor and yells of victory, or defeat, wreaked havoc on his enhanced hearing. The game had barely been going for five minutes and there was already a throbbing headache forming behind his eyes.

And to make matters worse, standing in the middle of a constant tornado of balls wasn't an ideal situation to be faced with if one had a sixth sense that warned them of every single thing that was about to hit them. Every. Single. Thing.

Peter didn't think many people could relate to that scenario, but he certainly could. And he could certainly testify that it wasn't a pleasant one to go through, especially when he was trying to keep a secret identity under wraps.

He had a sneaking suspicion that people might start to get a little curious if he dodged every ball that was thrown at him, including the ones directed at the back of his head (all of which were thrown by Flash. The other boy was on the opposite team, and he'd been catapulting every single ball he laid his hands on straight towards Peter), but he couldn't help it.

His spider sense had two very distinct modes. One of which was a low, constant hum at the base of his neck, which told him that the danger wasn't immediate, but it was there, waiting patiently in the shadows for a time to strike.

The second mode was like a reflex. It was really an involuntary response, the result of a message his brain sent to his limbs, and he could barely control it. The response in question came in the form of a sharp jolt tingling up and down his spine, and then his body was reacting before he knew what was going on.

Dodgeball wasn't a particularly dangerous situation for him, but his brain still recognised every ball that came close to hitting him as a threat, and warned his body as such. As a result, he'd pulled off some pretty spectacular dodges, and Flash had grown angrier and angrier with each ball he hurled that missed its target.

Peter just hoped that the building emotion clouded Flash's judgement enough to prevent him from realising how weird it was that Peter had been able to dodge balls that he shouldn't have even seen coming.

Technically, he didn't *see* it coming.

It wasn't much better that he'd actually *felt* it coming instead.

In what seemed like the most cliché finale ever, it was just him and Flash left. Peter hadn't been successful in his attempts to get out, and Flash was surprisingly athletic, as much as Peter hated to admit it, which meant he'd been able to last just as long as an enhanced teenager. An incredible feat, really, but one that he was not going to be congratulated on.

Mainly because no one knew that Peter was an enhanced teenager, and he would quite like to keep it that way.

However, the only way he could see that happening was if he ended the game, but to do that, he'd need to get Flash out, which would only fuel the other boy in his hatred for him.

He hadn't really started the day with the goal of making a schoolyard nemesis, but as he glanced at the desperate faces of the classmates on his team where they were sitting on a bench on the side of the court (nerds were surprisingly competitive when it came to sports. He was kind of scared to see what they'd be like when it came to more academic exploits), Peter decided he might as well cement his fate.

He stole a deep breath to try and clear his brain of the aching waves of pain that had been bothering him since the game started, and elegantly twisted around a sloppily thrown ball.

In one, smooth movement, he scooped up another one of the cursed red balls, his enhanced agility making it as easy as taking candy from a diabetic man who no longer wished to eat candy. In the next second, Peter lined up his aim and drew the ball back.

He had Flash like shag carpet caught on a toenail, and with one jerk of his arm, he delivered the final blow.

The ball rocketed through the air and collided with Flash's midsection forcefully. The boy fell to the ground with an overly dramatic grunt, or maybe Peter had thrown the ball just a little harder than was strictly necessary?

It was entirely possible. He was just as much a petty little bitch as the next person.

The sound that his team made at the clear defeat of the last of the opposition was somewhere between a walrus giving birth to farming equipment, and a leaf-blower with strep throat. Deafening, and all together unpleasant.

In gym, he'd found the third thing he disliked about school. Both the changing room situation and everything afterwards was hell, and he was half-considering coercing Tony into flexing his billionaire superhero muscles to get him out of the class altogether, but normal kids didn't get to do stuff like that.

And all he wanted was normality. School had provided that for him, despite the fact that the entire system was strange and inconvenient (he still hadn't let go of the early mornings that would greet him five days a week from now on), and that trumped anything he may not like about the experience.

School was good. It was normal.

Peter was normal, finally.

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Tony sped to a halt outside the front of Midtown's gates, sitting in the driver's seat of his Audi and ignoring the awestruck looks his car was attracting. So driving one of his nicer cars (and that was saying something, *all* his cars were nice) out to the front of Peter's school probably hadn't been the most inconspicuous of plans, but at least Tony had had the foresight to reinforce the tinting on the windows. Unless he rolled them down himself, no one would be recognising Iron Man from outside the car.

Ordinarily, he would have let Happy drive, but he felt this was too important an occasion to be lazy. He was picking up Peter from school. *His first day of school*. Peter, who had gone from 'the kid' to 'his kid' faster than Tony could have imagined. Peter, who was now his...son?

He still didn't know what to think about it all. He needed time to process this glorious realignment of the universe.

And speak of the devil, because there the kid was, looking exhausted but happy as he jogged up to Tony's car and awkwardly shuffled in. He apparently disapproved of Tony's choice to drive such a stare-attracting car, because the first thing he did was shoot Tony a long glare.

"The Audi, Tony? Really? You couldn't just, I don't know, drive Steve's antique Cobra or something?"

"Now, where would be the fun in that?" Tony smirked, as he stomped on the gas and they tore away from the curb. "So, kid, hit me. I want a detailed explanation of how incredibly life changing the day was. Go."

"Well, it was pretty good," Peter said, eyes bright. "Sometimes. Other times, not so much. Ned showed me around and the whole place is pretty cool, and I liked all my classes. Except for history, 'cause our teacher made me stand up and introduce myself to the class. That was just pure evil."

Tony chuckled. "You want me to give you a few introduction speech pointers? I could get all the girls falling at your feet, kiddo. No one can resist the charm of my wit."

"Except your literal girlfriend," Peter pointed out.

"If you're talking about Pepper, kid, I'm offended that you would trivialise her into such a *basic* category. Pepper's more than just a *girlfriend*. She - she's -"

"The one that runs your own business for you?" Peter suggested, grinning at him now. "Yeah, that's what I was thinking too."

Tony scowled at him. "I *could* bring up the fact that you're using my own wit against me, since you obviously just plagiarised that from a burn I gave like, five months ago--"

"Did not."

"-but I'll choose to instead take the moral high ground. So there's the evil history teacher, what else?"

"Well, gym would have been okay if it wasn't for the fact that we played dodgeball, which made

my senses go batshit crazy, and that definitely wasn't a fun experience, and the entire thing was just *so* cliché. But I was the last one standing anyway, and I did get to take out Flash, so that kinda made up for it-

"Wait, Flash?" Tony interrupted. "Who the hell is Flash? Sorry, but if that's a person and not just a pet flashlight or some other similarly nerdy thing you've cooked up with that Ted boy-"

"Hey, don't act like you don't know his name," Peter smirked, rolling his eyes at Tony. "Are you really still petty 'cause I ditched you that one time for a sleepover with him?"

"The betrayal *hurts*, kid. It stings. And it'll sting even more if you tell me Flash is the name of an actual human being."

"Well, prepare to be royally stung, because that is absolutely right," Peter grinned at him. "I mean, his actual name is Eugene, but he got nicknamed Flash because apparently he's super fast at answering stuff in class, but it's almost never, ya know, *correct*."

Tony glanced at the kid, noticing the smug expression on Peter's face. "And let me guess, you unleashed your inner genius and channeled the memory of your great mentor, Tony Stark, and got it right instead?"

"Basically, yeah," Peter grinned, looking immensely proud of himself. "Flash wasn't too happy about it, though. Later at lunch, he started being like, a really petty dickhead, throwing napkins at me and Ned and stuff. Then he called Ned fat."

Tony let out a low whistle. "Sheesh, kid. Low blow. What did you do?"

Peter sent him a defiant grin. "I told him to, uh, back the fuck off. And he did."

Tony laughed loudly, entertaining himself with the thought of Peter recklessly standing up to a jackass named Flash and burning him to the ground. The image was highly amusing to him. And if he was being honest, he also felt kind of...proud.

"That's the kid I know and love," he grinned at Peter. "Oh, and speaking of. Something came in the mail today. I got it on email too, but I thought it would be more dramatic with a hard copy."

Peter looked at him curiously, and Tony grinned, pulling out the envelope that he'd been waiting to give Peter this whole time. It was already opened, and Peter withdrew the letter inside.

Tony had already read it over at least a dozen times, of course. The words were seared into his memory, burned there with a permanence that he didn't think he would forget for the rest of his life, but he glanced over again all the same, unable to resist the satisfaction of seeing it there in print. Bold and big and *real*. Finally, it was real.

*Peter Stark*

*Son of Tony Stark*

"I mean, I know it was technically approved weeks ago," Tony said in a would-be casual voice. "But the actual documentation came today. It's official, now."

Peter looked up at Tony, a mixture of disbelief and excitement and something else that Tony couldn't quite pinpoint in his eyes. "Wait, really? This is for real?"

"The realest of the real," Tony confirmed, feeling a warm glow spread in his chest at the look of happiness on Peter's face. "You're my kid, kid."

## Chapter End Notes

And....that's a wrap.

The final wrap. The wrap to end all wraps.

Honestly, both of us are kind of in shock right now, because it's been such an amazing journey and we can't imagine not having this fic in our lives. It's been such a huge part of the last nine months for us and we've loved having this ongoing side project that we both cared maybe a little too much about (seriously, we were obsessed with writing this, if the 240,000+ word count isn't enough of a giveaway). At the same time, it had to end at some point and we're so proud of the way it finally turned out.

Thanks so much to all of you for sticking with us on this amazing, and very, very drawn out, journey. Your support has been awesome and it genuinely made us so happy to see all of the kudos and comments flooding in every time we posted a chapter. It motivated us to keep writing and we loved hearing from all of you guys :)

We had a blast writing this fic, and we hope you had an equal blast reading it.

We love you guys, until next time :D

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!